d. One Hundredth Street was dark, filled with life. I turned off Second Avenue into the street, searching for Number 321. I passed the people, and they were dark too, as seemed appropriate for those who lived in this block. For a moment I imagined that if white men lived here very long, they too would turn dark, by laws as irrefutable as the one that would make them dark if they lived on the beach in Florida — except that here the darkness would not be caused by the sun but by the lack of it.

I passed the dark scar of a vacant lot, blistered with refuse, and came to a building that looked like most of the others. The number was 321. I pushed through the door that was patched with raw board where glass once was, and started up the steps. There were voices, in Spanish, and sounds of frying. An odor like dead cats possessed the stairway. On the third floor I knocked at the door of the front apartment, and one of the girls greeted me.

Dan Wakefield, *Island in the City*

e. It is a very small office, most of it taken up by a desk. The desk is placed smack in front of the window — not that it could have been placed anywhere else; this window looks out on the daylight landscape of Bergman's movies. It was gray and glaring the first day I was there, dry and fiery. Leaves kept falling from the trees, each silent descent bringing a little closer the long, dark, Swedish winter. The forest Bergman's characters are always traversing is outside this window and the ominous carriage from which they have yet to escape is still among the properties. I realized, with a small shock, that the landscape of Bergman's mind was simply the landscape in which he had grown up.

James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*

6. In the passages just quoted: (a) Discuss each author's use of verbs, and how it suits the nouns he uses. (b) Can you find places that might be improved? Try improving one phrase in each passage.

ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS AND OTHER MODIFIERS

Qualities and Choosing a Style

Modifiers — adjectives, adverbs, participles, and sometimes other words — give quality to nouns and verbs. "The *huge, green* lion"; "leapt *slowly.*" Adjectives and adverbs *modify* nouns and verbs. Participles, and sometimes nouns, work in the same way: "the *grinning* lifeboat," "the hypothesis *constructed* on Thursday," "*rock candy* mountain," "*mouse* music." Used well, modifiers create distinctions in meaning, and add particularity to the particular. They discriminate and add precision.

But modifiers give us the greatest trouble of all parts of speech. A writer using clichés assembles prepackaged combinations of nouns and adjectives. A beginning writer, when he tries to write colorfully, may stuff his style into obesity with a diet of fat adjectives.

Overuse or misuse of adjectives and adverbs makes prose weak and lethargic. Because they are qualities rather than actions or things, adjectives and adverbs are inherently weaker parts of speech. Yet once more, choosing a style *means* something. A *change in style, however slight, is a change in meaning, however slight.*

To choose vigor in writing is usually to work with fewer modifiers. A few great writers, like Faulkner, use as many adjectives as any beginner — but use them well, and with great originality. Most of the best writers use them sparingly and then make them count. We are not saying that adjectives are unimportant to writing. They are important. But verbs and nouns carry the sentence; if they take charge properly, they liberate adjectives, adverbs, and other modifiers to do their proper work, to make the exact final discriminations necessary to honesty and fullness.

Using Modifiers Well

Ernest Hemingway is known for using adjectives and adverbs sparingly. Let us look once more at the passage that begins "In Another Country."

> In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more. It was cold in the fall in Milan and the dark came very early. Then the electric lights came on, and it was pleasant along the streets looking in the windows. There was much game hanging outside the shops, and the snow powdered on the fur of the foxes and the wind blew their tails. The deer hung stiff and heavy and empty, and small birds blew in the wind and the wind turned their feathers. It was a cold fall and the wind came down from the mountains.

Hemingway says, "the war," not "the long war" or "the distant war" or "the bloody, maiming, killing, useless, horrid, revolting war." He uses "always" and "any more" as adverbs in his simple predicates.

"Cold" is an adjective in the second sentence; "electric" is necessary to lights, at a time when electric lights were new — in a country at war they seemed especially unwarlike; "pleasant" is an adjective as restrained as the verbs "was" and "go." Then the eye of the paragraph turns away from restrained thoughts of war, and looks at the dead animals that substitute for dead soldiers; right away the verbs and nouns become stronger and more particular: "game," "shops," "powdered." Then the adjectives, exact and strong, come marching in: "stiff and heavy and empty." The last is especially vigorous. The adjectives used sparingly are used strongly and well.

Let us apply the same standards to the passage quoted before from a story by John Updike.

> All the warm night the secret snow fell so adhesively that every twig in the woods about their little rented house supported a tall slice of white, an upward projection which in the shadowless gloom of early morning lifted depth from the scene, made it seem Chinese, calligraphic, a stiff tapestry hung from the gray sky, a shield of lace interwoven with black thread.

Updike is sometimes condemned by critics for overwriting, for self-indulgence in description, for too much prettiness. Can you find anything here to back up such a charge? We can admire a writer, or a passage of his writing, and still find flaws.

What good does the word "secret" do us? It adds a little to the meaning — a kind of coziness — but to me the word seems there mostly to be pretty. I would like the line better if it read, "all the warm night the snow fell so adhesively. . . ." "Warm" is connected to "adhesively," but "warm" would be stronger if as an adjective it were more isolated, if the next noun, "snow," did not carry its adjective also. Then later, in one phrase after another, each noun takes one adjective, and although each adjective is defensible in itself, the effect is monotonously pretty: "tall slice," "upward projection," "shadowless gloom" "early morning." The mixture tastes too sweet. Rearranging clauses, putting an adjective after a noun instead of before it, putting two adjectives with one noun and none with the next — any number of minor reworkings could improve the passage.

The modifier in exposition or argument can help you or hurt you, just as in poetry and fiction. E. B. White, in a brief essay on schools, says that he always went to public ones; by contrast, he says, "my wife was unacquainted with public schools, never having been exposed (in early life) to anything more public than the washroom of Miss Winsor's." The sentence includes several modifiers — "unacquainted," "public," "exposed," "early," and "public" again — and yet it has vigor and clarity. The words express light disdain for the snobbism that White associates with private schools. The verb phrase "was unacquainted with" is preferable to alternatives like "knew nothing about" because "acquainted" is a word we use in social contexts: "No, I am not acquainted with that person." In the small world of White's sentence, the past participle wears a monocle and looks down at the peasants. "Exposed (in early life)" suggests that public schools are a contagious disease, like measles. And the parenthesis "(in early life)" has a mock formality that agrees with the medical metaphor.

But the adjective with which White plays the best trick is "public," which he uses twice: first with "schools," and then in the phrase "anything more public than the washroom of Miss Winsor's." "Public" then becomes associated with public lavatories; we wrinkle our nose in disdain. At "Miss Winsor's" — the name sounds snobbish — of course the lavatory would be spotless and relatively private. What's more, it would not be a lavatory, john, W.C., or even bathroom; it would be a "washroom." By a *turn* on the adjective "public" — from describing schools to implying lavatories — White makes his point most clearly.

In expository prose, adjectives usually narrow a noun's generality, to make the statement more specific. But if we do not watch ourselves carefully we'll let the adjective drift into one of its characteristic errors. Here is a passage of exposition from a student theme.

> If you approach the shore of a rocky island, in your kayak, you must paddle slowly and cautiously. Even a gentle breeze may crush the kayak against a sharp rock, and sink the traveler, his vehicle, and all his very precious equipment.

Let us examine the modifiers. "Rocky" is necessary. "Slowly and cautiously" might become only "cautiously," because "slowly" seems included in the idea of caution. "Sharp" is useful, to make the threat more particular. But "very precious" is not so useful; is the equipment any more precious by being called so? Does "very" do anything at all? The sentence would end more vigorously as three nouns in a series: ". . . the traveler, his vehicle, and his equipment."

One adjective in the piece makes a palpable cliché, "gentle breeze." Yet the writer clearly wants, and needs, to tell us that the winds that can cause this accident need not be gale force. "Why not

use 'gentle breeze' " says the beginning writer, "since 'gentle breeze' is exactly what I mean?" But the problem is not "what I mean," but "what gets through"; the problem is communication. "Gentle" together with "breeze" simply repeats a commonplace, and the reader is unmoved. We would do better simply to alter the expectation slightly, and speak of a "faint breeze," "slight breeze," or "tiny breeze."

Take another passage, this time by a professional writer.

> The November meeting at the Union League Club was widely reported in the press, which saw evidence of high enthusiasm and sober purpose in the proceedings. A period of feverish activity now ensued. Legal documents were drawn and redrawn (mostly by Choate), potential trustees were sounded out, and advice was solicited. On January 31, 1870, the first board of trustees was elected. The ingredients of this twenty-seven-man founding board were predictable — a pomposity of businessmen and financiers, a clutch of lawyers, a nod of city officials, and a scintillation of writers and architects; less predictable, perhaps, was the inclusion of four practicing artists — the painters John F. Kensett, Frederick E. Church, and Eastman Johnson, and the sculptor J. Q. A. Ward.
>
> Calvin Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces*

Usually a careful writer, Tomkins sounds fatigued. Commonplace combinations of adverb and verb, or adjective and noun, make much of the prose tedious, wordy, and wasteful: "widely reported," "high enthusiasm," and "feverish activity." The clichés of color are there too: the "ingredients" of the "board" were "predictable." Other modifiers are decent qualifications, like "*November* meeting," and "*legal* documents." The author moves into color and vivacity at the end through strong nouns, "a pomposity of businessmen and financiers, a clutch of lawyers, a nod of city officials, and a scintillation of writers and architects."

The Adjective and the Cliché

Beginning writers often misuse modifiers, especially as portions of clichés. In our minds we associate adjectives and nouns in pairs. Our minds are not only computer dictionaries, they are junkyards of cliché. If we think "grass," we probably think "green." We move in worn tracks. If we think "snow," we think "white." These weary associations are not really thinking; they are automatic responses to stimuli.

The more we can be ourselves, the less we will resemble a machine. If we remember more closely the grass and the snow we are describing, we will describe it precisely, out of our own memories, not out of the sad memory bank of other people's words. We might find an unexpected adjective for grass that is accurate for the grass at that place and that time. We might think of "harsh grass." Or we might not describe the grass at all, or we might describe it in a clause or in a whole sentence. But we must avoid the description that repeats familiar associations. Only the distinct particular takes our attention. Green snow is news.

Other nouns summon their cousin adjectives by bookish associations. The word "sentinel," for many of us, carries with it the adjective "lonely"; "the lonely sentinel" is a cliché. Some of these combinations become comical from overuse or inherent absurdity, like "inscrutable Oriental." Others have sources not so bookish: "responsible citizen," "gracious living." Whenever you use an adjective that sounds habitual to its noun, try omitting the adjective, or recasting the phrase. In avoiding cliché, we have to *think*. We have to decide what we mean by a phrase like "fundamental truth."

The Modifier That Weakens the Noun

An adjective gives us the noun's quality or type: *white* snow. An adverb relates to a verb in the same way: he grinned *happily*. But each of these examples would be bad style in most contexts. In each, the modifier diminishes the word it should strengthen. "Snow" is whiter than "white snow." "Snow" is white in the brain's computer-dictionary, so why color it, unless to suggest its opposite? To say "white snow" brings to mind snow that is gray with dirt. This suggestion might be just what the writer wanted: "White snow fell, that morning, on the trash of the old city." The contrast is part of the meaning; "white" takes its place, modifying "snow," because of the later words "trash" and "city." But most of the time, when a writer adds "white" to "snow," he subtracts from his sentence. He adds "white" in an uneasy search for particularity; he lacks confidence in the insides of "snow." The adjective overinsists on a quality already firm in the word.

If we know that the character grinned, must we be told that he "grinned happily"? It can only bring to mind that he *might* have

grinned unhappily, which is a nasty thought; the author reassures us that this supposition is not so, but without the reassurance, there would have been no supposition.

A beginning writer often goes through stages with adjectives, and different people have different problems with them. With some beginners, all adjectives are predictable.

> It was a long trip from the high mountains of the frozen north to the desert wastes of sunny Arizona, but it was highly educational and well worth while.

Or remember Jim Beck's original theme on going to college.

> Education is of paramount importance to today's youth. No one can underestimate the importance of higher education. It makes us well-rounded individuals and . . .

The problem is not primarily adjectives and adverbs, but thinking (or not thinking) in the old tracks.

Modifiers as Weak Intensives

We misuse adjectives and adverbs as weak intensifiers. We say "she moved gracefully" when we might say with more gusto that "she danced" or "she swept" or "she glided." We use vague adjectives in place of specific ones or in place of clauses that could add color and precision. We say "a tremendous amount," when "amount" is vague and "tremendous" is a weak and unspecific intensifier, or "really huge," when we might say "ten million" or "as long as a supertanker." Here the specific number or the comparison carries color; the accuracy is one of feeling, not of dimensions.

Automatic Adjectives

Another misuse of adjectives and adverbs, a more advanced or sophisticated misuse, appears in writers when they suddenly appreciate bright colors in writing, and appears frequently when we begin to write stories and poems. In this misuse, the symptom is not cliché but multiplicity. Nearly every noun carries its adjective, like a tote bag, and every verb wears an adverb for a cape. The style is flashy and overdressed. Here is part of a poem written by a student in a creative writing class.

> I woke suddenly from a ghost-ridden dream
> of old women, to find myself wandering vaguely
> on the far edges of the raw city where white skulls tipped crazily
> in the western sky, and dirty children ran by
> to the cave shelters of abandoned cars . . .

The lines are improved by mechanically stripping them of modifiers. Should any be kept? Yes. "Abandoned" is necessary to the emotion in "abandoned cars." If it is merely "cars" that are "shelters," they could be comfortable, middle-class vehicles in which one drives to the supermarket with one's mother. The "abandoned" makes the children take "shelter" in something like a dump.

Certainly "old women" is different from "women." The phrase is altered by leaving out the adjective; perhaps we should restore "old." But the other modifiers are well exterminated. "Suddenly" does nothing but make the line move less quickly. "Ghost-ridden" does little to intensify "dream," and what little it does, the later image of the skulls does better; also, hyphenated adjectives are usually bad — John Heath-Stubbs, an English poet, says that one should always be cautious of hyphenated names: it means that the lineage of one of the families is not too sound. In "ghost-ridden," what does "ridden" mean? Is the author really using the inside of the word? Does he know what the inside *is*?

"Wandering" includes "vaguely" the way "snow" includes "white." "Edges" are necessarily "far." "Raw" seems to add something to city, and perhaps the author would want to keep it, but the word adds little to the poem except a harshness that is better expressed elsewhere (in "skulls tipped" and "children ran by to the shelters of abandoned cars"). And it adds a metaphor that connects with nothing else in the poem. When you call a city "raw," you are making a metaphor; since cities are not culinary objects, they are in reality neither "raw" nor "cooked." When we call a city raw we are comparing it to a steak or a carrot or an egg; "uncooked" is an inevitable inside of the word "raw." But nothing else in the poem comes from the kitchen. The metaphor in "raw" is not followed through, unused because the author was unaware that he was using a metaphor. He was using "raw" conventionally, as in "raw deal" and "raw material" — without paying attention to its insides. In a poem, the experienced reader absorbs the insides, and is disturbed by the dead and unfulfilled metaphor. Let us omit the adjective "raw."

"Skulls" are "white" enough without calling them so. If skulls are tipping in the sky, we don't need an elbow in our ribs commenting "crazily." This adverb appears to specify the action "tipped"— but would you be able to distinguish between a skull that was tipping crazily and one that was tipping sanely? Really, "crazily" describes nothing; it unecessarily testifies to craziness in an image that is already crazy.

"Western" in this context adds nothing to speak of. West is sunset and death, perhaps, but here it is mostly a pretty noise and a useless specificity. "Dirty" does nothing for "children" that is not done better by verbs and nouns (and by the "abandoned" modifier in the spare version). "By" together with "to" is overly prepositional, wordy. And "cave" adds an image or a metaphor that clutters the final line. It is harsh and moving to find that "shelters" for these children are "abandoned cars." This juxtaposition elicits the emotion. To compare (by way of an adjective) the shelters to caves is to confuse the feeling, and to drag in another world of comparisions: cavemen, Neanderthals, and fur clothing.

The general noun "shelter" seems to me to work better than the more specific noun "cave," which is used as an adjective. But a good argument could support choosing "cave" over "shelter," making the last line, "to the caves of abandoned cars." We could argue that the associations of "cave" include darkness, and that the primitive world (cavemen) makes a strong contrast with the automobile. Whichever word you prefer, "cave" or "shelter," one thing seems clear: either word by itself is better than the two words together. The modifier belongs to the same world as the noun— caves are like shelters are like caves— and so adds nothing but the slight confusion of its difference. The noun alone is preferable, here as everywhere in poetry and prose, unless the modifier adds something to a noun that is already precise.

The poet was at a stage in his writing when he used a modifier automatically with every noun and verb. The modifiers were not predictable; the author was past the stage of clichés, or, more accurately, he was at a stage where he could cut them out before he brought his work to class. But he was diffident about his nouns and his verbs. His nouns and his verbs were doing their jobs well, but he lacked confidence in them. And so, to protect the poor things, he sent each of them to kindergarten with an adjective holding its hand.

When he revised it, the poem read:

I woke from a dream
of old women, to find myself wandering
on the edges of the city
where skulls tipped
in the sky, and children ran
to the shelters of abandoned cars . . .

Here only two modifiers remain from the thirteen in the original version. Certainly the spare revision is better writing, and it was accomplished wholly by deleting modifiers.

Nouns as Modifiers

In the phrase "cave shelter," "cave" was a noun used as a modifier. Writers use participles and nouns as modifiers— "sheltering cave," as well as "cave shelter"— with the same dangers, and the same opportunities, which attend plain adjectives. Use them with the same cautions in mind.

It is an advantage of the English language that its grammar is not rigid. In some languages, a noun would have to undergo respelling before it could be used as an adjective. English has a reputation among languages for adaptability and looseness. It can accept change. And because it accepts change, in speech and writing, the writer or the speaker can make shades of meaning more precise. Using nouns as modifiers, we can say "house party," "religion committee," "death wish."

We can also say "this type grammar," or— as in Bergen Evans's example of tediously multiplied nouns-as-modifiers— ". . . he absconded with the River Street fire house Christmas Eve party funds." Because English lacks rigidity, it is subject to chaos and disorganization. "Type" is frequently a filler-noun, and when we use it as a modifier we make even less sense with it than we normally do. With Bergen Evans's example, as with too many sentences that are seriously intended, the proliferation of nouns as modifiers creates heaviness and awkwardness.

Be careful when you use nouns as modifiers. Sociologists are guiltiest of abusing this device. One hears of the "city group research effort." By the time one reaches the third of these noun-modifiers, one

begins to feel afloat in a sea of possibilities. What will go with what? It is as if one were suddenly cast adrift in a Chinese sentence, with no inflections, and with no connectives, and with no tense or number. Instead, confine yourself to one or two noun-modifiers in a row.

Revising Modifiers

When you revise your prose, question the need for every adjective and adverb. Can I do without these modifiers? Does the noun (like "postulate" in "basic postulate") or the verb (like "run" in "run quickly") do the job without the modifier? Or can I find an exact noun or verb to do the job in one word? Do I avoid a succession of adjective-noun combinations, the monotonous pairs? Do I fall into cliché by joining two words that are commonly used together? Do I, on the other hand, use the modifier when I need it, to make the discrimination, or to add the color, which makes the sentence expressive?