

way to eat asparagus is to throw back the head, grasp the stalk between thumb and forefinger and lower it slowly into the mouth, chewing steadily.

Diane White, "The Noble Asparagus"
(*The Boston Globe*)

c. A machine gun lashed at him from across the river, and he ducked in his hole. In the darkness, it spat a vindictive white light like an acetylene torch, and its sound was terrifying. Croft was holding himself together by the force of his will. He pressed the trigger of his gun and it leaped and bucked under his hand. The tracers spewed wildly into the jungle on the other side of the river.

Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead*

d. The service shall be delivered in the following manner: Immediately before commencing to serve, the Server shall stand with both feet at rest behind the base line, and within the imaginary continuation of the center mark and side line of the singles court. The Receiver may stand wherever he pleases behind the service line on his own side of the net. The server shall then throw the ball into the air and strike it with his racket before it hits the ground. Delivery shall be deemed complete at the moment the racket strikes the ball.

"How Service is Delivered," *Official Tennis Rules*

e. Weighing the half-pounds of flour, excluding the scoop, and depositing them dust-free into the thin paper sacks held a simple kind of adventure for me. I developed an eye for measuring how full a silver-looking ladle of flour, mash, meal, sugar or corn had to be to push the scale indicator over to eight ounces or one pound. When I was absolutely accurate our appreciative customers used to admire: "Sister Henderson sure got some smart grandchildrens." If I was off in the Store's favor, the eagle-eyed women would say, "Put some more in that sack, child. Don't you try to make your profit offa me."

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

NOUNS

Particularity and Choosing a Style

Nouns are the simplest parts of speech, the words least tricky to use. Nouns are the names of things, "things" in the broadest sense: table, elm, Nancy, rain, noun, Centerville, nation, hunger, nine o'clock. If verbs supply the energy that makes prose go, nouns are the body of prose. Without nouns, nothing would be doing the going.

Many of the generalizations that apply to verbs apply to nouns also. We prefer as a rule the specific, the sensuous, the strong, the

simple, and the colorful over the abstract, the general, the polysyllabic, and the fancy. We prefer "elm" to "tree," "Nancy" to "girl," and "nine o'clock" to "evening." The more particular the noun, the clearer the pictures we make, and the more accurately we can represent feelings. When a student wrote,

I remembered a group of flowers that grew on some land near a relative's house . . .

he changed it to,

I remembered a patch of daisies that grew on a meadow near my Cousin Annie's farm . . .

and the particularity is all gain. The first example was not bad style, but it was pale prose. The second by comparison is vivid.

But we generalize, and we must express reservations. Sometimes the more general noun is more accurate and honest than the specific one. From a distance, you see "a man" or "a woman," not "a sophomore" or "a mechanic." "Town" may be more appropriate, in the right context, than "Centerville," though it is less specific. We must keep in mind the advice to be specific; but, as ever, we must be wary that our rules do not lead us into absurdity. A student revised some daily writing into,

On Tuesday afternoon, October thirteenth, I read a sentence halfway down the first page of *War and Peace* which . . .

Maybe in a particular context, such extreme specificity would be useful, but usually it would sound overly precise.

Also, we must remember again that the advice to cultivate one kind of style, at the expense of another, means thinking or seeing things in special ways. *A change in style, however slight, is always a change in meaning, however slight.* For some types of writing, like a scientific summary, or a paper in philosophy, an injunction to "Be particular!" and "Avoid abstraction!" is worse than useless; it is destructive.

At first cats would not seem to offer a likely clue to human history. Yet when one considers that the writing of adequate histories of human populations began scarcely 200 years ago, that writing itself dates back only about 6,000 years and that for many populations historical, linguistic and cultural records are inadequate or nonexistent, cats appear in a different light. They have been associated with human beings for a long time, but they have never had any

economic significance and only rarely have they had much social significance. Genetically they, unlike other domesticated animals, have been left largely to themselves. The study of the population genetics of cats is therefore rewarding not only for what it reveals about the evolution of cats but also for what it suggests about the movements of human populations.

Neil B. Todd, "Cats and Commerce"
(*Scientific American*)

Todd writes a vigorous expository prose, which must be abstract and concrete by turns, where each level of diction is appropriate. So must books about prose style, for that matter.

The wise advice is simply to be as particular as the context allows us. Too often, we are vague and general, when we would say much more by discovering the concrete. Instead of saying,

When it got cold the animals looked for shelter.

we could convey much more by a particularity.

In October there was frost; the sheep huddled in one corner of the barn for warmth, the cattle in another.

Abstract and Particular

Degrees of difference separate the noun at an extreme of abstraction from the noun at an extreme of particularity. S. I. Hayakawa, in his book *Language in Thought and Action*, speaks of moving up a ladder of abstraction, climbing from the most particular level, gradually discarding particularities, and arriving into the thin air around the highest abstraction. His example is clear.

1. The cow known to science ultimately consists of atoms, electrons, etc., according to present-day scientific inference. Characteristics . . . are infinite at this level and ever changing. This is the *process level*.

2. The cow we perceive is not the word, but the object of experience, that which our nervous system abstracts (selects) from the totality that constitutes the process-cow. Many of the characteristics of the process-cow are left out.

3. The word "Bessie" . . . is the *name* we give to the object of perception of level 2. The name *is not* the object; it merely *stands for* the object and omits references to many of the characteristics of the object.

4. The word "cow" stands for the characteristics we have ab-

stracted as common to cow₁, cow₂, cow₃, . . . , cow_n. Characteristics peculiar to specific cows are left out.

5. When Bessie is referred to as "livestock," only those characteristics she has in common with pigs, chickens, goats, etc., are referred to.

6. When Bessie is included among "farm assets" reference is made only to what she has in common with all other saleable items on the farm.

7. When Bessie is referred to as an "asset," still more of her characteristics are left out.

8. The word "wealth" is at an extremely high level of abstraction, omitting *almost* all reference to the characteristics of Bessie.

The number of rungs on this ladder is limited only by our ingenuity, but I think we can most usefully distinguish three main degrees — the abstract, the general, and the particular. These notions can always be expanded. Within "the particular," we can subdivide into greater or lesser particularity. Take "animal, dog, spaniel." One might go further into particularity by adding a proper noun, or age, or color, or by naming a breed of spaniel — with the greater particularity always requiring more words. One might go higher in generality to "organism" or sideways into scientific classification with "quadruped." And these threesomes are quite relative. We can list three words which are all abstract but which become more nearly specific: "emotion, love, lust." The writer could use "lust" not as one of the seven deadly sins, but as an embodiment of the general "love"; he might have said "desire" or "eros," but "lust" seemed clearer.

The more abstract a noun, the more difficult it is to use well. Words like "emotion" (or "love," for that matter) or "courage" or "hatred" or "responsibility." To make these nouns work, you must provide a context with anecdote or analogy; you must put flesh on the bones. Usually an adjective in front of an abstraction does not do the work. The abstraction is lazy, retrieved by the writer from the attic of Big Ideas, and the adjective strives to do all the work, but adjectives themselves often are weak, and so we have two weaklings failing to budge the door that one strong noun could burst open. "Love" is thin and airy; it is pretty, but what is it about? Our affection for a pet salamander? The feeling of a grandfather for his granddaughter? Bert's obsession with the character of Charles Dickens? Mark and Nancy in the Oldsmobile? Married affection? "Love" is a grab bag of possibilities, only a bit less abstract than "emotion" or "feeling." If we modify it with the adjective "intense," we narrow its possibilities a little, but

we do not really localize it. If we speak of "young love," we are more particular — and yet we move toward cliché. Many clichés are adjective-noun combinations in which the adjective is a desperate, though habitual, attempt to rescue a bland abstraction; "blind faith," for example.

Abstractions are usually lazy. The writer finds it easier to label the general category of a feeling than to search out the particulars that embody the feeling. Sight, taste, smell, touch, and hearing carry feeling from writer to reader — concepts don't. (And most writers using abstractions, we notice instantly, are not using concepts with the precision of a philosopher but vaguely and inaccurately.) Usually, we talk best about "love" when we do not use the word at all. If we use "Nancy," and "Centerville," and "a 1969 Pontiac," and "rain," and "nine o'clock," and connect them with strong verbs, the reader may know what we mean by the big hazy word "love" — in this time and in this place.

"Time" and "place" are abstractions. Are they used appropriately here? Sometimes the abstract affords a setting for the concrete, as a black velvet background shows up diamonds. In other contexts, instead of "time" and "place" we would want to use more specific words — steering wheel, September, elm, Long Lake Road.

Abstractions: Beginnings and Endings

An abstraction can be explained by context, an analogy or an anecdote. Some abstraction or generalization is necessary to any conceptual or argumentative writing. Only fiction, poetry, and autobiography can be free of it, and they do not always stay free. When we revise an essay, we should look most carefully to eliminate abstractions at two points — beginnings and endings. Frequently, we introduce a subject with an abstraction, "I am going to tell a story that illustrates inequality," and then we tell a story that illustrates inequality. If the illustration is clear, the introductory abstraction was unnecessary; what is more, it was probably distracting. When you announce that you are going to tell a funny joke before you tell it, you take the humor away. Let the idea of inequality arise in the reader's mind — by name or not — from your anecdote, and it will be much more powerful. Telling the reader the meaning of what he is going to hear bullies him; he is likely to resist.

Similarly, we often write anecdotes that trail off with an abstraction. Having told a perfectly clear story, we end, "which is an illustration

tion of the inequality so prevalent today." Don't nudge your reader in the ribs, saying, "In case you didn't get it, this is what I mean." We summarize abstractly because we lack confidence in our own writing, and in the reader's intelligence. Of course some stories need interpreting; that usually makes them less valuable. If the road is clear, do not put up road markers; they are good only for stumbling over.

Invisible Nouns

So far, we have been talking about degrees of particularity and color, and we have admitted that some prose needs abstractions. The Preacher could not have said, "All is vanity," if there had been an enforced commandment against abstractions. But some nouns are almost always useless. These nouns are invisible. When someone says, "The snow is gray in color," what is the phrase "in color" doing? It doesn't do anything for meaning or particularity. It tells us more about the speaker, though not on the snow. Maybe it contains a message informing us that the speaker is precise, academic, and pompous.

Words like "nature" and "character," which have perfectly good uses, turn up invisibly in pale prose. Probably the snow was gray in color because of the urban nature of the environment, and the frigid character of the weather.

We use invisible nouns with adjectives — much as we use invisible verbs like "be" and "do" and "has" with adjectives or nouns — to make a sentence *sound* grander than it really is, or because we lack the vocabulary. Whatever the reason, we abuse the language. Some other nouns we render invisible: "sense," "kind," "action," "situation," "respect," "regard," "case," and "element." Look at this piece of prose from the annual report of a large corporation:

The President is pleased to report that, despite the unusual nature of the fiscal situation in the past twelve months, earnings have risen substantially above the margin foreseen by the Treasurer's Report of March, 1971. In a marketing sense, the profitable character of the corporation proved itself under trying circumstances.

"Circumstances" is another invisible noun — at least as it is used here.

Making Bad Nouns from Verbs

The sensible writer chooses the plain noun, if it is adequate, over the fancy one, and he chooses the old noun rather than making up a

new one. On page 83 I mentioned the verb "finalize," which had been wrenched out of an adjective: it has been wrenched further into a noun: now and then we run across "finalization," when "end" or "finish" or maybe "finality" would do. Bad stylists know no limits. "Scrutiny" is a fine noun; "scrutinize" is a necessary and traditional verb. But recently a young man wrote on an application form that he submitted documents "for your scrutinization." The word means nothing more than "scrutiny"; it must have sounded more respectable to this writer.

Or maybe his vocabulary failed him. He remembered the verb "scrutinize" but forgot the noun "scrutiny." So he made up a new noun out of the verb. When you are tempted to make a new noun from a verb, go to the dictionary first. You know "unify"; when tempted to create "unification," go to the dictionary and you will find "unity" and "unification" — and clarity, and a more eloquent prose.

Fancy Nouns

Reading bad prose, we find thousands of examples of pomposity or fanciness, either neologisms like "scrutinization," or polysyllabic alternatives to simple words, like "domicile" for "house" or "cessation" for "end." These words parallel verbs like "masticate," substituted for "chew." The fanciness may arise from diffidence or ignorance or pretension or whatever. The result is the same; fanciness separates the thing described and the mental act of perceiving it. Feelings are kept at a distance. Fancy abstractions and clichés enable Orwell's Communist professor to discuss without feelings the murder of innocent people.

Revising Nouns

In revising, we should look for the lazy abstraction, as well as the invisible noun, the neologism, and the merely fancy noun, and remove them when we find them. Removing one of these leaves a hole, which we can fill with another noun, or a phrase, to specify and bring down to earth the airy word we started with. Lazy abstractions are like clichés and jargon — and the three are usually discovered together — because they are instantly available to the tongue; they lie heaped together with clichés and jargon in the foreroom of the brain; we do not have to search for them with our intelligence, or dream for them with our imaginations. Here is a passage from a paper.

Financial problems were coming to a head in my family last spring and we didn't know if my sister and I could have the benefit of higher education. Then my grandfather got the surprise of his life when a large amount of money came his way when he least expected it. He got a sum from the VA which he didn't know was coming him. Through his generosity, we were enabled to arrange payment for tuition.

As usual with faulty prose, the faults do not lie in one part of speech alone. Some hunks of cliché are ready-made — "financial problems," "coming to a head," "benefit of higher education," "surprise of his life," "when he least expected it," "arrange payment" — and combine with a dozen other signs of lazy thinking and evasion of feeling. Think of the emotional reality — the anxiety, the jubilation in a family — these phrases obscure with their familiar haze. Instead of "financial problems," let us forget euphemism and talk about being in debt, or having no money, or losing a job, or payments coming due; *anything* more particular. The ultimate particularity would probably sound as cold as a balance sheet (outstanding indebtedness \$27,429.31; assets ...), but we know a median lies between the bland, evasive euphemism of "financial problems" and the sterile figures. The median is actual circumstances and anecdotes; the median is stronger than the extremes.

Certainly "go to college" or "go on in school" is preferable to "have the benefit of higher education." Then instead of speaking generally of "surprise" — an abstraction that takes the surprise out of surprise — why not show it happening? Describe the grandfather opening the envelope, or picking up the telephone. Use dialogue. Or use some new analogy to express his feelings, instead of a useless cliché. He could be as surprised as someone who finds a pearl in his clam chowder. How much is "a large amount of money" or "a sum"? Both seem genteel evasions for saying a specific figure, like "a check for \$5,000." But perhaps it seems crass to the writer to name the figure. Then at least some phrase could give a better idea of numbers, so that the reader can place the figure between five hundred and five million dollars, or judge the amount of money by what it can do: "received a check for enough money to send us both through school."

The phrase "through his generosity" includes an unnecessary, labeling abstraction. We do not need to be told that he is generous. When we are bullied with the notion, we resist it. Maybe the old man just wants to boast that his grandchildren go to college. Finally, the last part of the paragraph has a pair of general nouns and a fancy verb

in place of simpler and more natural language. It is pretentious to write "we were enabled to arrange payment for tuition" when we could write, "we were able to pay for college."

The student, in fact, revised the passage into:

My family was so far in debt last spring that we didn't think my sister and I could go to college. My father had borrowed money to get a fish and chips franchise, and lost it all in six months. My sister and I both took jobs in the summer. I was working twelve hours a day in the mill, and when I came home at night I was so mad and tired I just drank beer and watched the box. Then my grandfather telephoned my father and I saw my father suddenly start crying. The VA had just sent my grandfather a check he didn't know was coming, and it was enough to pay for us both. That night, we bought a bottle of Four Roses.

He changed verbs and other parts of speech, but the revision of his nouns is most useful of all.