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WORKING WITH WORDS

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A lot of the fun of being a writer comes from the sheer pleasure of working with words. Not only inventing new ones (see BLOG/84, November 2017). But additionally the multifarious challenges of finding the *mot juste*; of avoiding repetition of favoured words; and of avoiding clichéd combinations of nouns and adjectives Why should debates always turn out to be ‘heated’? or every array be denoted as ‘dazzling’? By the way, for those who enjoy nothing as much as a time-honoured cliché, there are splendid compilations to be consulted.¹



Fig.1 Detail from William Hogarth's *Distrest Poet*,
from oil painting c.1736, engraved 1741.

My personal favourite is Gustave Flaubert's *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, which contains the following admirable dictum on 'FEUDALISM: No need to have one single precise notion about it: *thunder against!*'²

To keep myself alert when writing, I set myself three internal technical challenges – as well as thinking about my main message. One test is that no two paragraphs within an essay or book chapter should start with the same first word. That avoids visually boring readers with a page of prose that contains a repetitious string of 'The .../ The... / The .../'.

The second test is to refrain from echoing key terms between one sentence and the next. It's very easy to get one's vocabulary stuck. But, fortunately, English is a rich and hybrid language, with many synonyms. So it is always possible to refer (say) to 'Parliament' in one sentence, and to 'the 'legislative' in the next. And so on. That way, readers are not numbed by a monotonous repetition of the same word, again and again, within one paragraph. Adding variety can be tricky in the case of technical terms, for which there are few synonyms. Nonetheless, variation can be achieved by inserting short explanatory points in simpler language. Repetition (whether in terms of vocabulary or sentence structure) is a powerful stylistic device. Yet it entirely loses its punch if it is used all the time.

So my third challenge also requires diversification. Sentences should not all be alike in length. If every point is expressed with the utmost brevity, one after another, the result can be a mind-overwhelming rat-tat-tat of ideas, without time for thought and assimilation. Let alone qualifications and nuances.

Equally, however, too many very long sentences, end to end, can be so rich and intricate that they become soporific. I've expressed that viewpoint before (December 2015) and can't resist quoting myself.³ 'Alternatively, the full and unmitigated case for long, intricate, sinuous, thoughtful yet controlled sentences, winding their way gracefully and inexorably across vast tracts of crisp, white paper can be made not only in terms of academic pretentiousness –

always the last resort of the petty-minded – but also in terms of intellectual expansiveness and mental ‘stretch’, with a capacity to reflect and inflect even the most subtle nuances of thought, although it should certainly be remembered that, without some authorial control or indeed domination in the form of a final full-stop, the impatient reader – eager to follow the by-ways yet equally anxious to seize the cardinal point – can find a numbing, not to say crushing, sense of boredom beginning to overtake the responsive mind, as it struggles to remember the opening gambit, let alone the many intermediate staging posts, as the overall argument staggers and reels towards what I can only describe, with some difficulty, as the ultimate conclusion or final verdict: ‘The End!’ [162 words in one sentence, which were fun to write but rather exhausting to read].⁴

Ideally, every sequence of lengthy sentences, which are often unavoidable in academic writing, should be counter-balanced by a pithy dictum. (Something a bit weightier than a Tweet; but incorporating the same brevity). To my students, I define a pithy dictum as a meaningful statement that’s expressed in ten words or less. How to enjoy working with words? ‘Write with variety’.

¹ J. Cresswell, *The Penguin Book of Clichés* (2000); N. Fountain, *Clichés: Avoid Them Like the Plague* (2012; 2015).

² G. Flaubert, *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, transl. and ed. J. Barzun (1954), p. 38.

³ P.J.C., ‘Writing Through a Big Research Project, *Not* Writing Up’, Monthly Blog/60 (Dec. 2015).

⁴ This puny effort barely registers in the smallest foothills of long sentences in the English language, the best known example being Molly Bloom’s soliloquy at the end of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), which is reportedly a sequence of almost 4,000 words (but including many shorter sentences put together without punctuation).