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English [course]

Short Essay #2: Response to *Elements of Style*

What were you trying to say?

Some pieces of information I found surprising while reading chapter two of *Elements of Style* were 'using the active voice', 'putting statements in positive form', and 'omitting needless words'. Using the active voice is a voice that is more direct, less passive, is used habitually, and is less forced. When using this active voice, the writer should get straight to the point in the sentence. They can use shorter sentences, use a particular word as the subject of the sentence, and try to make the meaning in the sentence more definite. This guideline was interesting to me and has been something that I struggle with as a writer because I find it more interesting to not get straight to the point in my writing. Since I've learned to read as a writer, the readings that I find most interesting are the ones that aren't as direct and definite; I like to find my way individually through a piece most times, without the reader being so blunt with the purpose of their writing. I guess since I write more poetry than anything, this is my pathology of writing. This guideline is however a great tool to have because it takes the pressure off of the writer to want to make the reader find out what they're trying to say, instead of them just saying it. It can sometimes be draining wanting the reader to explore through your piece as you put more effort to make your piece less definite when they may not want to explore in the first place, but rather want to just read your piece and have a definite understanding instead of being confused. Make sense?

An example from my writing from Essay #1 can explain: *We are able to encounter many different people in those bathrooms and go through experiences with them if the moment occurs. Sometimes the greater conflict is our responsibility to others and sometimes we don't intend to help people when we go to use the bathroom, but instead end up changing their lives and not even knowing it.* These sentences shows how indirect my writing can be and how I want to explain more and more for the reader to understand what I'm trying to say. I could have instead combined these two sentences and used a particular word such as conflict or responsibility to be the subject of my sentence. This would have made the sentence and purpose more definite. A corrected example can be: *The greater conflict is our responsibility to help others. Sometimes these conflicts are in bathrooms. Sometimes these conflicts are moments that change our lives and we don't even know it.* These updated sentences are more direct with my purpose of 'conflict and responsibility' and don't use as many words but have shorter sentences to explain. These also aren't the best-updated sentences but I am working on making my sentences more direct and less passive.

Another piece of information I found interesting was the ability to put statements in positive form. Taking most Writing instead of English classes in college have assisted in my skewing from the structure of writing and making writing more free-form, hence my difficulties in speaking in positive form. Speaking in positive form is to avoid noncommittal language, have definite assertions, and be conscious of word choice. The book used the word *not* as an example to be a means of dismissal instead of approval. Initially looking at this, it makes sense to use a

negative word negatively, but in *Elements of Style* the point is to understand that you don't need to use a negative word to dismiss the meaning. You can make the sentence positive instead to dismiss the meaning entirely. I find that this happens a lot in my writing because I tend to write like I talk. I use a lot of words when speaking and will continue to speak until I think the person understands what I'm trying to say. I do this in my writing. I will use negative words to explain something so thoroughly, when I can instead make the sentence positive by not using a negative word. This can also take the pressure off of me trying to explain what I want to say by using negative word choice.

An example of my writing from [Writing course] that relates to this style point is: *Not the feeling of visualizing them, but the factual concreteness of them being in your presence, breathing your air, touching your hand, for all of 3 minutes.* Since *not* is a negative word that can dismiss the meaning (and I don't want to at all dismiss the meaning), I can instead take the word out and compress the sentence and make it positive here: *It is the feeling of visualizing them, the factual concreteness of their presence. They breathe in your air and touch your hand, for all of 3 minutes.* I think this update puts more emphasis on the sentence(s) and gives a more direct, positive meaning instead of a negative refusal of the meaning. (Using the positive instead of the negative is now very helpful surprisingly).

The last piece of information that I found interesting and is something that I've always struggled with as a writer was the style point to omit needless words. *Elements of Style* claims that, "a sentence should contain no unnecessary words and a paragraph no unnecessary sentences" (p.23). This means that as a writer one

should not think to make all their sentences short, but should instead make sure that every word in every sentence counts. This was a lot to take in for me. Most words that I think count and should matter in my writing don't matter to the reader. This doesn't mean however that the word doesn't matter but rather that it's just useless for that particular sentence. *Elements of Style* also says that a way to fall into this trap of using useless words is to present a complex idea, step by step instead of combining the sentences into one. This was the hardest style point for me to accept because as a poetic writer, I'm comfortable with using more words to explain my point. I also like to present ideas and explain them in follow-up sentences. This style point however is not saying to take away the words you find important, but to make every word count because every word does count. Don't use useless words just to compress or expand a sentence, but rather use direct words to shorten a sentence and be direct in your expression.

An example that relates to this style point from Essay #1: *The impact was hard against my shoulder and I found myself annoyed by the fact that she'd made me drop my phone.* As I read this again I noticed that I was using too many words to explain my annoyance. I can instead say: *She hit my shoulder so hard that I dropped my phone. I was annoyed.* I think that omitting 'found myself' and 'by the fact that' gets more to the point of my annoyance. Why was I annoyed? Because she hit my shoulder and made me drop my phone. I don't have to have useless words such as 'found myself' and 'by the fact that' because they're purposeless for this sentence.

These style points have shown me one main viewpoint: to be more direct in my writing. I think that a main issue I face as a writer is my passive word choice and

my indirect meaning. I write how I talk as well as how I read which may not be helpful for the readers who don't do this or better yet, don't understand what I'm saying when I think I've explained my point thoroughly. I tend to use more words than others and feel the need to explain the meaning in my pieces more than being direct and straight to the point to begin with. This is even confusing trying to explain. I think that a good writer uses their individuality to express their writing and that a great writer takes new viewpoints into consideration for their readers and improvement of their writing. I will try to use these style points and many more in future pieces because they assist in my understanding of my writing, how I can be misunderstood, as well as organization and structure.