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Book Review: *Reading Style: A Life in Sentences*

By Deborah L. Borman

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Set the scene: you are hunkered down to grade a set of student briefs. Before long before your eyes glaze over, your lids grow heavy and you start to doze because of the dull, uninspired writing. Suddenly you find yourself going micro and writing this sentence in the margin: “make the subject more compelling.” Legal writers, especially novices, are often so focused on technical details that they forget good written communication begins with sentences that engage, “glimmer,” and at their best transport the reader.

To become better writers, students need to read great authors. For this reason, I always recommend that law students who want to become the best legal writers read great literature and novels especially those with subtle themes and complicated plots. Any good story with a subtext can help students develop better legal communication skills. The use of subtext, both psychosocial and historical, by many authors influences the reader’s perception and opinion of the characters. A compelling story can also be told with strong allusions and a variance between embellished details and short, direct descriptions. By working at the micro level with each sentence, students can craft a full brief that will glimmer from start to finish.

In her new book, *Reading Style: A Life in Sentences*,¹ Jenny Davidson, a professor of comparative literature at Columbia, makes a detailed examination and analysis of the sentences of great literature, identifying the techniques within the small scale of each that tacitly lead to “transcendence in fiction: getting lost in a book.”

Davidson defines the concept of transcendent reading as the “high glimmer factor.”²

Davidson’s book consists of a series of lectures on literature she gave in 2009. Each chapter stands alone as a unique lesson students can glean from literature to better inform their legal writing. While Davidson’s book analyzes fiction writing (and a little bit of nonfiction in the last chapter), and some concepts are more relevant to crafting good legal communication than others, she offers many writing techniques that are adaptable to legal communication, particularly when it comes to advocacy.

The first step to crafting better sentences starts with “immersive reading.” As Davidson posits: getting lost in a book “makes life itself worthwhile.” By becoming an immersive reader students will appreciate writing for an audience that wants to be immersed in the material.

What makes the reader get lost in a book? To answer that question, Davidson explains we should look closely at the way great writers describe human thoughts and existence in ways that “involve[s] the application of a critical intelligence, more neutrally observing than judging or summing up and yet ready to make selections and discriminations when they are called for.”³ Davidson advised to “show, not tell.” Applying critical intelligence to a story is the very essence of effective legal writing in both objective and persuasive forms.

Moving on to style, in her chapter “The Advantages of Bad Writing” (don’t get too worried here), Davidson writes: “Sentences can be verbal artifacts of untold complexity ... The term style derives

¹ Jenny Davidson, *Reading Style: A Life in Sentences*, (2014).

² *Id.* at 3.

³ *Id.* at 8.

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from the Latin *stilus*, a pointed instrument for writing; *glamour* is etymologically a corruption of *grammar* to refer to a body of occult knowledge.”⁴ Style is everything, and that this is not just true for literary writing but for all writing. Davidson uses the word “temperament” to describe the complex set of intellectual, emotional, political, and cultural traits that make up a given person’s identity as expressed in words: *to wit*, the author’s writing “style.” The sentence is the key to the heart and “embodies ethos in a way that renders deeply ingrained habits of thought visible to the naked eye.”⁵

Clear and effective writing is ethical and clichés are an offense against humanity. Hear, hear.

In legal communication, we instruct our students to keep themselves out of the story. Personalization, or the preoccupation with the social self is also annoying in fiction: Davidson writes that it is trivializing. She calls out John Cheever, John Updike, and Alice Munro, whom she criticizes for focusing on depicting personal shortcomings, as a “massive foreground of people with problems.”⁶ These authors, and Alice McDermott, quoted in the passage below, offer sentences describing *sensation* at the expense of *emotion*:

Leaving the church she felt the wind rise, felt the pinprick of pebble and grit against her stockings and her cheeks ... And all before her, the lunch-hour crowd bent under the April sun and into the bitter April wind, jackets flapping and eyes squinting, or else skirts pressed to the backs of legs and jacket hems pressed to bottoms. And trailing them, outrunning them, skittering along the gutter and sidewalk and the low gray steps of the church, banging into ankles, candy wrappers, what else?—office memos? shopping lists?⁷

What is important in describing an event, says Davidson, is what the character—and for our

purposes the lawyer’s client—was *thinking* not *feeling*: reading about sensation is alienating to the reader. This is something brief writers should remember if they ever cross the fourth wall in advocacy and begin raging against the opponent or the opponent’s position.

Davidson promotes (and enjoys) the occasional use of simile and comparison. She also illustrates the successful telling of two sides of a divergent story. For example, Davidson features a dual excerpt from *The Post-Birthday World*, by Lionel Shriver. There, Shriver features two different orientations toward a character’s state of being, and even illustrates the differing moral implications. In the first passage, the protagonist Irina has kissed another man, Ramsey, and is then serving pie to her boyfriend, Lawrence. Differences in the description of serving the pie show Irina’s internal world:

For Lawrence, she hacked off a far larger piece—Lawrence was always watching his weight—than she knew he wanted. The wedge sat fat and stupid on the plate, the filling drooled. Ramsey didn’t need admiration for his snooker game, and Lawrence didn’t need pie.⁸

In Irina’s alternative story, she has refrained from kissing Ramsey:

She shouldn’t have any herself; oddly, she’d snacked all afternoon. But countless chunks of cheddar had failed to quell a ravenous appetite, so tonight she cut herself a wide wedge, whose filling blushed a fleshy, labial pink. This she crowned with a scoop of vanilla. Lawrence’s slice she carefully made more modest, with only a dollop of ice cream. No gesture was truly generous that made him feel fat.⁹

In writing a legal brief, knowing how to tell both sides of a story is, of course, a very useful technique not only for the statement of facts, but also in crafting the theory of the case which is maintained throughout the brief.

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⁴ *Id.* at 11-12.

⁵ *Id.* at 13.

⁶ *Id.* at 16.

⁷ *Id.* at 18.

⁸ *Id.* at 22.

⁹ *Id.* at 23.

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Moving into how we hear words—in our heads or reading aloud—Davidson suggests that the sensation of acoustical elegance or aphorism can be both pleasing to and unpleasant for the reader, as distinguished from what she describes as “transactional” or “load-bearing” sentences, which provide objective information. She notes that it is better to evoke an emotional response in the reader elegantly (acoustical) than to attempt to do so via details of the sensation of the writer/character (transactional). Another example of the importance of “showing” rather than “telling.” In this chapter, Davidson hyper-focuses on the style and structure of Jane Austen (one of her favorite authors). First a transactional sentence from *Emma*:

Her mother had died too long ago for her to have more than indistinct remembrance of her caresses, and her place had been supplied by an excellent woman as governess, who had fallen little short of a mother in affection.¹⁰

The above sentence is a straightforward transactional description, providing context for the character. This is the kind of sentence structure legal writers might use to lead off an objective statement of facts.

Distinguish that sentence from the acoustical, aphoristic set of sentences below (a combination of a short pithy sentence containing the truth of a general import), a maxim (stylized, crafted, controlled), and a sentence that produces identification and empathy:

The real evils indeed of Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her.¹¹

The first sentence elegantly provides broad background information that operates as a summary of the character’s life. The second sentence catches the reader’s attention with its unusual word combination of “threatened alloy”—the word “alloy” being used as an abstract noun, rather than as a more familiar verb—thus signaling “that something is happening beyond what is said.”¹² The final sentence is like an 18th Century poetry couplet (i.e., “to err is human, to forgive, divine”), but the symmetry of the couplet is interrupted with the word “however,” transforming the traditional couplet into satire and portending an unpredictable future for the character. The inclusion of certain words, the omission of others, and an unusual combination of words—all of these techniques evoke responses in the reader.

Other transferrable sentencing techniques the legal writer can glean from Davidson’s book are paying attention to repetition and pacing: “The speed at which we read something is not supposed to affect the reading experience in any deep way.”¹³ Nonetheless, I know that I feel more positive about a memo or brief that I can sail through and digest it immediately, both for form and substance, as opposed to writing that is so turgid I need to don imaginary, mud-proof, reading Wellies. She pays homage to dear Strunk and White and their adage: “Omit needless words,” noting that it is good advice for inexperienced writers. But for the more advanced writer, a combination of elegant variation and repetition causes the reader to pay close attention and increases the momentum of the story. Note the “rubric” of “clamp racks” in Peter Temple’s *Black Tide*:

Against the righthand wall were the clamp racks: at the bottom the monster sash clamps; above them, the lesser sizes; in the next rack, the bar clamps, the infantry of joinery, dozens of them in every size; then the frame clamps, the spring clamps, the G-clamps, the ancient wooden screw clamps that Charlie love best, and flexible wooden go-bars arranged by length. Finally an assortment of weird clamps, many of them

¹⁰ *Id.* at 37.

¹¹ *Id.* at 38.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.* at 55.

invented by Charlie to solve particular clamping problems.¹⁴

On pacing, Davidson tells us that the speed at which the writer gets to a particular point can provide a flourish to details that she wants the reader to settle on for a bit longer or to point a direct route to conclusion.

In her final chapter, “The Bind of Literature and the Bind of Life,” Davidson addresses loss and the framing of emotions, both in fiction and nonfiction: describing the human condition. In quoting a nonfiction author who describes her observation following a nuclear disaster, she notes that the ultimate goal of the writer is to facilitate the production and recording of the testimony and acts of witnessing, “rather than to create sentences whose beauty and precision might do justice to the perfection of human ingenuity in a machine that brings death.”¹⁵ Poignant, important, and full-circle: to the legal writer, craft a sentence that

is meaningful, but always within the context of your client, your position and your argument.

Although to be sure Davidson at times gets lost a bit in the details of certain authors or passages—remember: these were lectures in a literature class—and there are some sections and chapters that do not particularly apply to legal communication as their purpose is to microanalyze passages from works of fiction, most of *Reading Style* operates as an informative book for advanced writers of all styles with great ideas for achieving a “high glimmer factor” in their writing.

“[S]he notes that the ultimate goal of the writer is to facilitate the production and recording of the testimony and acts of witnessing ...”

¹⁴ *Id.* at 56.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 170.

Micro Essay: Practice Ready

Interruptions in the Classroom

We all know law practice is unpredictable, yet most of our legal writing courses follow a predictable pattern. In a pilot course titled “Practice-Ready Writing” we taught this past summer, we incorporated “interruptions” into several classes. For example, in the middle of a class, students would receive an email via TWEN from their supervising attorney about a client with a pressing matter. The students had to respond within a set time, usually one to two hours. The interruptions helped students to be more efficient researchers and writers.

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