

Summary of section one (Principles of classic style) in Mark Turner and Francis-Noel Thomas: *Clear and Simple as the Truth: Writing Classic Prose*, 1994.

<http://www.stafforini.com/blog/summary-of-clear-and-simple-as-the-truth/>

Clear and simple as the truth

Writing is an intellectual activity, not a bundle of verbal skills.

For classic style, successful presentation consists of aligning language with truth, and the test of this alignment is clarity and simplicity. Good style is defined not by a set of techniques, but by an attitude toward writing. What is most fundamental to that attitude is the stand that the writer knows something before he sets out to write, and that his purpose is to present this knowledge to a reader.

The concept of style

Classic style is one among many different writing styles. It is a style that can be acquired consciously, but is unlikely to be picked up without deliberate effort.

Classic style was used with notable skill and effect by some of the outstanding French writers of the seventeenth century. These masters of classic style conceived of themselves as addressing an intelligent but non-specialist audience.

Classic style is focused and assured. Its virtues are clarity and simplicity. Its prose is pure, fearless, cool, and relentless. It is a style of presentation with claims to transparency. It rests on the assumption that it is possible to think disinterestedly, to know the results of disinterested thought, and to present these results without fundamental distortion. All these assumptions may be wrong, but they constitute a set of enabling conventions by which the style is defined.

Recognizing classic style

Classic style can be characterized by examples. Consider, first, a passage from La Rochefoucauld:

Madame de Chevreuse had sparkling intelligence, ambition, and beauty in plenty; she was flirtatious, lively, bold, enterprising; she used all her charms to push her projects to success, and she almost always brought disaster to those she encountered on her way.

This passage, a prototype of classic style, may be contrasted by the following passage from Samuel Johnson:

That praises are without reason lavished on the dead, and that the honours due only to excellence are paid to antiquity, is a complaint likely to be always continued by those, who, being able to add nothing to truth, hope for eminence from the heresies of paradox; or those, who, being forced by disappointment upon consolatory expedients, are willing to hope from posterity what the present age refuses, and flatter themselves that the regard which is yet denied by envy, will be at last bestowed by time.

La Rochefoucauld's passage displays truth according to an order that has nothing to do with the process by which the writer came to know it. The sentence has a clear direction and goal, and leads the reader to that goal, which coincides with its final phrase. By contrast, Johnson's passage does not telegraph its structure from the opening.

Classic prose is difficult to write, but looks easy. The writer hides all the effort. Johnson's sentence is clearly difficult to write, and the writer wants to display it as if it were a trophy won through personal effort. **In the theology behind Johnson's sentence, writing is hard and noble, because truth is the reward of effort and cannot be captured in mere human speech. In the theology behind La Rochefoucauld's sentence, writing should look easy even as it looks masterful. Truth is a grace that flees from earnest effort. The language of truth is ideally graceful speech.**

The elements of style

The elements of style can be expressed as a short series of questions concerning a set of relationships among truth, presentation, writer, reader, thought, and language. Style thus follows from a set of fundamental decisions rather than from a catalogue of surface features. The approach to style as a list of surface elements leads to the view that there is only one style, as opposed to a number of different styles defined by the various possible stances on the central issues. The remainder of this part of the book describes the fundamental questions that define the different writing styles, and the answers to these questions that define classic style.

The classic stand on the elements of style

Truth

Classic style can be seen as a version of Descartes's approach to truth. **Descartes saw himself not as arguing for a conclusion, but as trying to place the reader where he himself stood in order to make his subsequent actions intelligible.** For Descartes, there are very few certain truths, but everybody has a natural endowment that, once purified, gives access to them. Classic style expands the domain of truth to include anything that might require not merely the knowledge of a convention but even the ability to make a judgment. It treats all its objects as if they were equally available to every observer and as if every reader has whatever may be necessary to verify what the writer presents.

In classic style, opinions stated clearly and distinctly are treated as if they can be verified by simple observation. The writer does not typically attempt to persuade by argument. Instead, he merely puts the reader in a position to see whatever is being presented. Classic style assumes that the reader will be able to verify what he is being presented with because the style treats whatever conventions it operates from as if these were shared by everyone. The classic writer prototypically neither argues nor asserts what is true, because it is part of the definition of the style that anybody in a position to see truth can recognize it for himself.

Truth can be known

There is probably nothing more fundamental to the attitude that defines classic style than the enabling convention that truth can be known.

Truth is not contingent

The concept of truth that grounds classic style does not depend on a particular point of view. In the classic view, what cannot be universally verified cannot be true. Just as the enabling convention that truth can be known contradicts the view of the radical skeptic, so the enabling convention that truth is not contingent contradicts the views of the romantic, the relativist, and the ironist. Truths are eternal both in the sense that they are discovered rather than created, and in the sense that future experience will always corroborate past testimony.

Truth is pure

For the classical attitude, truth is a standard for measuring human virtue. The classic attitude acknowledges human inadequacies, but is never despairing. We are not impotent, merely weak, and we can grow stronger. In the classic view, we can not only aspire to what is fundamentally true and valuable, we can even succeed in these aspirations.

The motive is truth

In classic style, the reader and writer are brought together by a common interest in the truth. The classical writer presents truth, and typically takes the position that the reader will recognize it. The classic writer rarely writes as if he is pressing claims and presenting arguments, but rather pretends that he is presenting subjects and conducting analyses.

Presentation

Prose is a window

Clarity is the central virtue of classic prose because the classic writer's defining task is to present something he has previously perceived. Classic prose is conceived as a perfectly efficient instrument, which neither invents nor distorts. Classic writers do not ask the reader to observe what they write as if it too is a thing; they invite the reader to look through it to what it presents.

Classic prose is perfect performance

Classic style is perfect performance, with no hesitation, revision, or backtracking. Its essential fiction is that this perfection happens at the first try. Classic prose is therefore final, and as such excludes three kinds of hedges. It excludes hedges of process: hesitations and uncertainties that arise because one is in the middle of thought. It excludes hedges of liability: insurance against the possibility of having overlooked something or being ignorant of something that would change the writer's views or conclusions. And it excludes hedges of worth: attempts by the writer to justify his or her project.

Every word counts

Classic style allows browsing but not skimming. We may turn from paragraph to paragraph in looking from thing to thing; but once we focus on a unit, we must pay attention to every detail. Classic style contains essential nuances, which are lost in skimming.

Clarity everywhere is not accuracy everywhere

Distinctions and nuance are among the most typical features of classic style. But when accuracy involves complicated qualifications of no consequence to the main issue, classic writers do not hesitate to simplify.

Scene

The model is one person speaking to another

The idiom of classic style is the voice of conversation: it models itself on speech and can be read aloud properly the first time. The rhythm of classic prose is a series of movements, each one brief and crisp, with an obvious beginning and end. In retrospect, we may see that these movements are organized into a flawless global structure, but the pretense is that this global organization is the natural product of the writer's orderly mind. Classic style eschews phrases such as "as we shall see", "three paragraphs ago", "before I move to my next point I must introduce a new term", and other examples of "metadiscourse", since it implicitly claims to proceed without a planned structure.

The prototypical scene in classic writing is that of an individual speaking intimately to another individual, and as such differs from oratory. In oratory, the implied author is a rhetor, an actor, adopting a role to address an implied audience consisting of a group of people. **The classic writer is not speaking to a group, and as such takes the pose of authenticity, which may make him vulnerable by exposing what he cares about. But although classic prose is intimate, it is meant to be overheard, because it never needs to be bent to fit the individual to which it is directed. The classic writer does not appear to have written things in a way he would not had he know others were listening.**

Prose is efficient but not rushed

There are no external pressures upon the classic writer. There is the absolute need to present truth about something, but that need is not imposed from the outside.

Classic style is energetic but not anxious

Classic style gives the impression that all of the writer's considerable energy is communicated directly to the writing, with none lost collaterally to anxiety or apprehension. The end of a particularly classic phrase seems to leave its writer in a state of repose out of which the next absolutely efficient movement will come.

Cast

Elite is not exclusive

Classic style is elitist; but the elitism of classic style is not the result of natural endowments. It is rather the result of effort and discipline ending in achievement. **The writer may speak with a technical mastery not possessed by the reader, but his attitude is always that the reader lacks this mastery only accidentally. You could know what he knows, and you would if you were standing where he stands, which is where the classic writer is trying to place you.**

Classic style is for everybody

Unlike the heavily personal style of a Proust, a Coleridge or a Baudelaire, classic style is assembled out of attitudes and techniques that are available to everybody and independent of any specific subject. There is a definite and knowable path to learning classic style, and you can acquire it fully.

The reader is competent

Classic style is modeled not merely on speech, but on the core concept of conversation—a conversation between equals. There is an implicit symmetry in the relationship between the writer and the reader. The writer may know something that the reader ignores, but the reader has access to the same source of knowledge that serves the writer. If, for example, the reader knew Madame de Chevreuse, he could have seen what prompted La Rochefoucauld write his description. Accordingly, the model assumes that the reader could take the next turn in the conversation.

The classic writer does not have to argue for a claim. All he has to do is offer the reader an unobstructed view, so that the reader can see. As such, the classic writer does not persuade; he presents.

The relationship between writer and reader in classic style is based on an unspecified set of perceptions and values held in common. When a writer makes a decision, it is presented as if it is a decision that the reader is equally capable of making. The silent convention is that a competent reader who had seen the evidence would have made the same decision.

The writer is authentic

The classic writer stands fully behind what she has to say because she has thought it out independently. Her conclusion is the product of her own thought. As a consequence, even when a classic writer reaches a common conclusion, it has the freshness of a discovery.

The writer is self-sufficient

The classic writer never appears to be pursuing self-interest. There is nothing the classic writer needs, and so there is nothing the classic writer is trying to get from the reader.

The writer is competent

Classic style frees writers from anxiety or silence by making the enabling assumption that the writer is competent. Truth, which is available to all, can be seen and presented by this writer. The result of this enabling convention is prose that is unclotted and that stays on track.

The writer does all the work invisibly

Suggestion is powerful, since people believe a conclusion more readily if they think they have helped to reach it or have reached it themselves. The classic writer does all the work invisibly. He pulls the finished finial out of his pocket. He isn't like a television cook showing you how to mix mustard and balsamic vinegar. He is like a chef whose work is presented to you at the table but whose labor you are never allowed to see.

Thought and language

The thought can stand alone

In classic style, writing is neither a way of thinking something out nor an art that exists for its own sake. Writing is an instrument for presenting what the writer has already thought. Classic expression has the distinctive character and the neat finality of a Bach partita, which begins by breaking a silence and ends by returning to silence, leaving nothing unresolved.

Abstractions can be clear and exact

From the classic viewpoint, the distinction between abstract and concrete has no consequence: abstractions are not in themselves bad, vague or inexact. When a classic stylist presents an abstraction, it is first conceived as independent of the writer, exhaustively definite at all levels of detail, visible to anyone competent who is standing in a position to see it, immediately recognizable, and capable of being expressed in direct and simple language.

Thoughts precede speech

Because classic style is a presentational style, it conceives writing as dependent upon a prior process of thought. This does not mean that in classic style all of the thinking precedes all of the writing, but rather that the classic writer does not write as he is thinking something out and does not think by writing something out. In every great restaurant there is a kitchen, where the work is done, and a dining room, where the result is presented. The dining room is serene, and the presentation suggests that perfection is routine and effortless, no matter how hectic things get in the kitchen.

In classic style, thinking is seeing, or more generally, recognizing. **Writing is presenting what the writer has seen so the reader can see it, too.**

The language is sufficient

The classic stand adopts as an enabling convention the view that language is sufficient to any thought. Everything that can be known can be said, and it is always possible to achieve a perfect fit between a thought and its expression.

Classic thought and classic language match

There are two kinds of fit between thought and language in classic style. The first—which makes the writer’s language sufficient to his thought—is lexical: there are already expressions in the language to fit any thought. The second—which makes the writer’s language an image of his thought—is structural: thought comes with a structure and a direction. **In the classic view, the prototype of truth is a thought that comes structured by some basic image schema—some skeletal image that underlie everyday experience. And the same image schema that structures a thought structures its verbal expression.**

Thought and language can be misaligned in one of three ways. First, the sentence may not be intelligible through any basic image schema. Second, the sentence may evoke an image schema and then fail to fulfill or complete it. Third, the thought and the sentence may be structured by image schemas that don’t match each other.

The most common image schema is movement along a directed path from a source to a goal. In this schema, the end of the sentence coincides with its goal. This schema gives rise to the phenomenon of stress position: whatever is put at the end of a sentence will be generally taken to be the most important part of it. Classic style respects stress position.

A common perceptual image schema is focusing-and-then-inspecting. First we locate the object or domain of interest, and then we inspect its details. Classic thought frequently follows this fundamental image schema, focusing on a subject and then inspecting its details; and classic expression of this thought shares the same image schema, first presenting the subject and then presenting details.

Many of the most familiar image schemas have to do with forces—impinging, pushing, pressuring, stopping, overcoming—especially when these forces are applied by agents in action. A classic thought is often structured by an image schema of action, and the corresponding classic expression mirrors this structure by assimilating the structure of the expression to the structure of the action: the subject is an agent and the verb is the action performed by the agent.

Other stands, other styles

A style is effectively a stand on a small number of central issues. As a consequence, many different mature styles are possible.

Classic style is not plain style

Plain style is communal, its model scene a congregation in which speakers reaffirm for each other common truths that are the property of all. In the theology behind plain style, truth is always simple, and it is a common human possession. Classic style does not reject plain style, although it rejects the theology behind it. From the perspective of classic style, plain style is deficient because its associated theology ignores that, left to themselves, people are vulnerable to special interests and prone to special pleading.

Classic style views itself as repairing the deficiency of plain style by introducing sophistication and individual responsibility. First, classic writers and readers are an elite community; anyone can take

up this practice and so join, but the style is aristocratic, nor egalitarian. Second, classic wisdom cannot be the wisdom of children because it depends upon a wealth of adult experience. In plain style, everyone is equal and truth is seen by all. In classic style, truth is available only to those who are willing to work to attain it; it is the possession of individuals who have validated common wisdom.

Classic style remedies the deficiency of plain style by requiring the writer to stand entirely behind the thought he presents. The requirement is that the thinking behind the writing be the achievement of an individual, who has done the thinking himself.

Consider the gradient between plain style and classic style. "The truth is pure and simple" is plain style. "The truth is rarely pure, and never simple" is classic style. The plain version contains many elements of classic style without being classic; the classic version contains all of the plain version without being plain. Classic style assumes that plain style already exists, and introduces a refinement, a qualification or a meditation on the plain version that makes it classic. The classic writer wants to be distinguished from others because he assumes that truth, though potentially available to all, is not actually the common property of common people. Accordingly, classic style takes the attitude that it is superior to plain style because classic style presents intelligence as a sparkling display, not weighed down by grinding earnestness. Anyone who wants to can attain classic style, but classic style views itself as an intellectual achievement, not a natural endowment.

Classic style is not reflexive style

In the classic stand on presentation, writing is a perfectly transparent window through which a subject is presented; the ability of the writer and the sufficiency of the language to serve this presentation are never in doubt.

Classic style is not practical style

In practical style, the best presentation will allow the reader to acquire timely information with a minimum of distraction because, in this scene, writing is an instrument for delivering information with maximum efficiency. In classic style, by contrast, neither writer nor reader has a job, the writing and reading do not serve a practical goal, and the writer has all the time in the world to present his subject as something interesting for its own sake.

Classic style is not contemplative style

Classic style differs from contemplative style in two respects. First, classic style presents something, whereas contemplative style presents an interpretation of something. This difference entails many different decisions concerning truth, presentation, cast, and scene. Second, classic style presents the product of thought according to the order of reason, whereas contemplative style presents it according to the order of experience. For this reason, in contemplative style writing is itself the engine of discovery: the writing is a record of the process of the writer's thought process.

Classic style is not romantic style

While Romantic style is not necessarily focused on the writer's thought, it is still, like contemplative style, about the writer. Romantic style doesn't separate thought from sensation, memory, and emotion. All these things together are experience. Neither does romantic style distinguish the

person who experiences from the experience itself. The romantic writer therefore cannot be an observer who sees something separate from himself. Classic writing may present personal material as an instance of a more general truth, but it never presents something that is merely personal or essentially private.

The classic stand on the elements of style is not always opposed in all particulars to the stand of other styles. Between classic style and practical style is an agreement that language is sufficient to express knowable truths. Between classic style and contemplative style is at least a channel for discussion: at least sometimes, truth can be known and language can express it. Between classic style and plain style is a gradient of conceptual refinement. But classic style and romantic style represent irreconcilable conceptual stands. There is no common ground between the two, no gradient from one to the other.

Classic style is not prophetic style

Classic style has little in common with prophetic or oracular style because prophetic style cannot place the reader where the writer is.

Classic style is not oratorical style

The differences between the oratorical and classic models of speech are considerable because oratory and the writing styles based on it have a lot of practical work to do. These oratorical styles cannot concern themselves with thought exclusively or even primarily. They have not merely to keep an audience made up of many individuals attentive and alert, but also to take a heterogeneous group of individuals and mold them into a unified body directed at action or the making of policy for action.

Trade secrets

There are two principal trade secrets: classic style's practical limitations and the ultimate incoherence of its theoretical perspective.

Classic style is inadequate

The theology behind classic style does not admit that there is anything that counts as truth that cannot be presented briefly and memorably. In practice, this simply means that classic style prefers to limit its domain while tacitly claiming universal application.

Truth is not mind-independent

The theology behind classic style has at its base this model: truth cannot be known independently of thought, but the thought through which it is known can be perfect. The trade secret can be expressed as two qualifications to the classic conception of truth. The first qualification is a practical limit: no writer can maintain for long the discipline needed to transcend personal interests and personal situations. The second qualification is an absolute limit: there is in fact no way at all even for the briefest space to know truth or the existence of truth independent of thought.

Envoi: style is not etiquette

The book does not offer itself as a shortcut to the impossible goal of learning to write English or any other language. It aims for the eminently possible goal of perfect understanding in a much more definite domain: classic style, with a local application to English.