

# The Five Virtues of a Good Writer

The great journalist and author Henry Hazlitt (1894-1993) offered the following excellent advice to writers:

*The reader who seeks to write well and think well should aim first at the essential qualities—coherence, clarity, precision, simplicity, and brevity. Euphony and rhythm are of course also desirable, but they are like the final rubbing on a fine piece of furniture—finishing touches justified only if the piece has been soundly made. As a method of procedure, the apprentice writer may often find it advisable first of all to root out his faults. He should try to acquire the Five Virtues of Coherence, Clarity, Precision, Simplicity, and Brevity by vigilant abstention from the Five Vices of Incoherence, Obscurity, Vagueness, Pedantry, and Circumlocution.”*

Here are a few of my own thoughts on these writing virtues and corresponding vices.

**Coherence** (as opposed to **Incoherence**) is the quality of forming a unified, integrated whole. For a writing piece to have coherence, it must have a clear purpose, and every constituent part of it must contribute toward that purpose. Long digressions and non sequiturs can make a piece incoherent.

**Clarity** (as opposed to **Obscurity**) in writing is about being easily understood by the reader. A writer who wants to be understood must think in terms, not only of expression (sharing one's thoughts) but exposition (sharing ideas intelligibly). Often attaining greater clarity in exposition goes hand-in-hand with attaining greater clarity in your own understanding of the topic. Comprehension and

comprehensibility are two sides of the same coin.

For a piece to be clear, it must flow well: both narratively and logically. Each passage must advance the story and/or argument of the piece in a way that naturally follows what came before it. A piece that is disjointed and “jumps around” too much will confuse the reader.

Clear writing must also be complete. It must not omit any points that are necessary for the reader to understand what you’re saying. Missing context will obscure your message. Unfamiliar, un-introduced jargon will also make your presentation opaque to the lay reader. Remember that the reader does not share all your knowledge. Be wary of presuming that a necessary connection will “go without saying.”

**Precision** (as opposed to **Vagueness**) in writing is about being exact and specific in conveying your meaning. Attaining precision is often a matter of “playing around” with a sentence to find just the right wording and phrasing to accurately get your meaning across. Consulting a dictionary and a thesaurus can be helpful for this.

**Simplicity** (as opposed to **Pedantry**) in writing is about limiting your exposition only to the essential. Writers with extensive knowledge of their subject are often tempted to over-share arcane details that would overload the reader. Don’t try to cram a comprehensive education of your subject into one piece. Shoot for the realistic aim of providing your reader an important lesson that is simple enough to be fully digested in one sitting.

**Brevity** (as opposed to **Circumlocution**) in writing is about getting your meaning across in as few words as necessary. (But no fewer. Brevity in excess can result in vagueness and obscurity.) Often one’s first stab at a sentence will be needlessly wordy and thus unwieldy to the reader. See what you can do to cut, compress, and recombine your wording to make

your sentence more concise and elegant. Prune any sentences that don't "carry their weight": that don't contribute enough value to your presentation to justify the additional work they demand from the reader. Sometimes this can mean cutting whole sections. You have to be willing to "kill your darlings" as William Faulkner put it.

I highly recommend using Hazlitt's Five Virtues/Vices as a handy checklist for evaluating and improving your own writing:

1. Coherence vs. Incoherence
2. Clarity vs. Obscurity
3. Precision vs. Vagueness
4. Simplicity vs. Pedantry
5. Brevity vs. Circumlocution

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