

Unit 9 : Editing the language

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Introduction

In the last unit we discovered that the language in texts is often too difficult. What may cause difficulties, and how can we make improvements?

At the end of this unit you will be able to:

- * identify vocabulary and syntax items which may increase the difficulty of a text;
- * identify cases where a prose presentation could be replaced;
- * enumerate inaccuracies which commonly occur in writing;
- * list guidelines on style and balance in a text.

Using the insights you have gained, you will then be able to:

- * make minor amendments to a text;
- * write a simpler version of a text;
- * advise a writer how to write more simply and clearly.

In this unit we consider a number of aspects of language and style. Complicated language makes a text difficult to understand; inappropriate style makes it unattractive and therefore difficult to read with attention.

You will find some grammatical terms in this unit. You may find it helpful to have by you a dictionary or a reference grammar. The unit will take 2 or 3 hours to complete, and the assignment will take about 1 hour.

1. What makes a text difficult?

Difficult vocabulary and complex sentence structure are the main sources of difficulty. We will now analyse a passage to identify these and other difficulties. Read the passage in Example 23 quite slowly, and then do Exercise 1.

Putting together some of the ideas in the unit

If an object is thrown up into the air it eventually comes down again – whatever goes up must come down. 1
This has been superseded in recent years with the advent of space probes, but is still generally true. If the 2
object could be thrown vertically upwards, it would return to the spot from which it was thrown. Let us 3
suppose that this happens and also that there is no friction with the air to take away any energy from the 4
moving object. This, once more, is taking a simplified or ideal situation to make it easier to work out what 5
happens during the flight. 6

The object starts by moving at some velocity which decreases as it rises, stops for an instant, and then 7
accelerates downwards so that it will be travelling quite fast again when it reaches its starting point. The 8
slowing down and eventual falling back is explained as being due to gravity, *i.e.* the Earth is pulling down- 9
wards on the object all the time. This means that the object has a downward acceleration, equal to 10 m s^{-2} , 10
all the time it is moving. While moving upwards we would probably prefer to say that the object was de- 11
celerating. 12

Another aspect of this situation is seen if we consider the changes of energy which take place. As the ob- 13
ject rises, its speed decreases and so the amount of kinetic energy decreases and eventually becomes zero. 14
The amount of kinetic energy then increases again as the object speeds up throughout its downward move- 15
ment. It seems fairly obvious that the energy is stored in some form and then changed back again to kinetic 16
energy. While it is slowing, and losing kinetic energy, the object is, of course, getting higher above the 17
surface of the earth and the stored energy is said to be in the form of potential energy. Whenever an object 18
is moved farther from the centre of the earth its potential energy increases at the expense of some other type 19
of energy. When the object moves back, its potential energy is converted into other types of energy. The 20
kinetic energy with which the object is provided at the start of its movement is gradually turned into poten- 21
tial energy and then changes gradually back again. 22

EXAMPLE 23: From 'The World of Science', National Extension College, Cambridge, UK, 1978, Volume 1, p.51

EXERCISE 1

The example is from a pre-university science course. The MFI for the first hundred words is 17. The passage is therefore at an acceptable level, but the average sentence length is 20.5, quite long. Let us see if the language gives cause for concern. Try to answer the questions below.

1. Underline all the terms which you think are technical ones. Can you see any that the writer has explained in the text? Are there any which are not explained?

2. The sentence which starts in line 7 is rather long. Underline all the finite verbs. How many are there? Does this suggest any obvious problem in the sentence? Can you see an ambiguous phrase in the sentence?

3. The last sentence, starting at the end of line 20, is particularly long, and that could cause comprehension difficulties. Underline all the finite verbs in the sentence. Do you notice anything awkward about the verbs? Can you suggest any change?

4. Read the sentence that starts in line 5. What is the subject of this sentence? Can you say why the sentence is awkward?

5. In line 2, can you identify a word that is used wrongly?

6. In line 15, can you find a word used correctly but unfortunately placed?

7. In line 11, what do the words 'while moving upwards' relate to? Comment on their position.

8. Read the two sentences in lines 18-20, starting 'Whenever an object...' Which sentence do you think is clearer, and why? Which is better punctuated, and how?

9. Read the whole passage again. Decide on one piece of advice to give to the writer.

(20 minutes)

Comment

1. You might have underlined the following: friction, energy, velocity, gravity, kinetic energy, potential energy. These are mostly words in common use, but used here with a precise technical meaning. You might

have included a few more, such as 'decelerate'. In lines 10-11 the writer explains gravity, and in line 18 he gives a description of potential energy. No other terms are explained; an editor would have to check that they are explained elsewhere.

2. The sentence has seven finite verbs:

'The object starts by moving at some velocity which decreases as it rises, stops for an instant, and then accelerates downwards so that it will be travelling quite fast again when it reaches its starting point.'

There are far too many clauses for one sentence. It is difficult to take in all the points. I would make two sentences, starting the second when the object begins its descent. The ambiguity is in the second clause 'which decreases'. What is the subject of this clause? What is the subject of all the others? The subject of the 'which' clause is 'velocity'; in all the others it is 'the object'. The use of 'which' is confusing. It is often difficult to follow sentences with relative clauses in the middle of them.

3. The verbs here are 'is provided', 'is ... turned' and 'changes'. The two passive verbs increase the complexity of the sentence. I would simplify the sentence by making them active.

4. The subject is 'This', but what does 'This' refer to? The whole sentence is vague and indirect. I would reformulate the sentence to make a definite statement. Something like:

'Once again, we simplify the situation to help us work out what happens during the flight.'

5. My dictionary gives several meanings for 'supersede'; all of them contain the idea of replacement. The writer is saying that the statement that whatever goes up must come down is still generally true. So a sentence saying the truth has been replaced but is still generally true is nonsense. 'Supersede' is one of a number of words which are commonly misused; you may want to compile a list of these false friends. Most people also spell 'supersede' wrongly, as 'supercede', a word which does not exist.

6. '... the object speeds up throughout its downward movement'; this is simply an unfortunate placing of the word 'up'.

7. The words relate to 'the object' later in the sentence, but their position suggests that we are moving upwards. Poor placing of adverbial phrases is another common error.

8. The second sentence, with its active verb 'moves' is much more punchy and direct. The inclusion of a comma in the second sentence also improves the structure.

9. The main shortcoming of this extract is its indirectness. In particular, the writer uses passive verbs a great deal. My advice would therefore be to use the active rather than the passive as far as possible.

Although we have identified a number of trouble spots in this extract, it is still an intelligible piece of writing. But each of these points will make a small difference to the reader's response to the passage. And when

you add them all up, you can see that the passage is much less readable than it might be. We will now look systematically at problems of different kinds.

2. Vocabulary

There are four common kinds of difficulty with vocabulary.

a. unusual words. Many words familiar to editors and writers, with their good education, will be unknown to a large number of your students. How can you decide which will be familiar to students at a particular level? One way is guesswork. Words that occur more frequently in ordinary speech are more likely to be recognised by poor readers or those with a restricted vocabulary. Look for long words, and replace them if possible by shorter ones with the same meaning. 'Incarnation' can be replaced by 'birth'. Look for abstract words and replace them with concrete, descriptive phrases. For example, you can refer to 'things you must do' instead of 'obligatory tasks'. Another way is to use a learners' dictionary, or word list.

b. technical words. Technical words are of two kinds: subject-specific technical terms, such as the names of bones in biology - 'femur, tibia, fibula' - and ordinary words used with a particular sense, such as 'energy' in physics or 'set' in mathematics. In both cases, the student needs to be taught the meaning of the technical term. Writers usually recognise the need to explain the first kind of term, but they often overlook the second kind. If you think that a word is being used in a technical sense, consult the writer and ask for an explanation to be included. Explanations can be included in the text, in the margin, or in a glossary. Often an explanation alone is not enough. Students may need to practise using a term in an exercise to help them learn it, and they may need some indication about how to pronounce it.

c. misuse of words. It is quite common to come across a word that is wrongly used, like the word 'supersede' in the example above. If you are rigorous in eliminating long and unusual words, you will generally avoid the problem. If you are in any doubt about a word, check in a dictionary.

d. phrasal verbs. In English, compound verbs of a kind known as phrasal verbs are very common. A phrasal verb consists of a simple verb followed by one or more prepositions or adverbs. The two words together have a distinct meaning of their own. Consider the meanings of these phrasal verbs using the verb 'take': 'take after, take in, take off, take out, take over, take up'. In the sentence, 'John took after his mother', it would not be possible to guess the meaning of the phrase 'took after' from knowing either the word 'took' or the word 'after'. Students using English as a second language have particular difficulty with phrasal verbs. It is advisable to use them sparingly. A readability formula is of no help in identifying phrasal verbs, as they usually consist of two common short words.

Example 24 is from a text deliberately written in simple English. It is from a correspondence course for subsistence farmers in Africa. They may have very little formal education. Examine it carefully, then do the exercise which follows.

MAINTAINING CORRECT MOISTURE IN SOIL

55. Too much water will damage the banana plants.
This often occurs during the rainy season.
This excess water must be drained.

The best way to do so is to
open up or clean the drainage canals
which were dug during the land preparation.
(See paragraph 34 of this booklet.)
This will allow the water to flow away.

If there are no drainage canals
or if the canals are not enough,
then dig a few canals
between the rows of bananas.

56. Sometimes there is not enough water in the soil
to make your banana plants grow properly.
This happens during the dry season.
During this time, it may be necessary
to irrigate the banana plantation.

To do this,
dig ditches between the rows of bananas.
Lead the water from the stream or pipe
with little dams and ditches
so that the soil in the plantation becomes moist.
Also apply mulching around the banana plants
to keep the moisture in the soil.

EXAMPLE 24: From 'Bananas', Farmer Production Series 203, INADES-formation, Nairobi, Kenya, 1982, p.30

EXERCISE 2

Identify the technical terms in Example 24. Do you think the readers will understand them?

(3 minutes)

Comment

The technical terms I have identified are drainage canal, plantation, mulching. The writer assumes the reader already knows these. Did you notice that in line 7, there is a cross-reference to paragraph 34 for those who are not clear about drainage canals? I believe the readers will understand, but the unit needs a glossary so that they can look up words such as 'mulching' if they forget them.

3. Sentence structure

Avoid sentences which are too long, indefinite, have several negatives or several passive verbs.

a. length. Exercise 1 included an example of a very long sentence, which was difficult to follow. Here is another example:

'If you take the managers separately, you then find that although they are both managers they do not carry out the same responsibilities.'

The complexity here is partly due to the number of clauses (4) and the relationship between them. Clauses beginning with 'although', 'unless', 'if' and other words introducing an element of uncertainty or doubt can help cloud the meaning. Aim generally for a sentence length of not more than 20 words, and you will avoid this difficulty.

b. indefiniteness. Impersonal verbs have an air of indefiniteness. Avoid introducing sentences often by 'it'. Make sure that 'this', 'that', 'which' and other relatives are carefully used.

In some subjects, particularly science, it is conventional to use impersonal verbs a great deal. You must use your judgement to decide when to follow this convention.

c. negatives. What do you think this sentence means?

'If the light is not green, do not cross the road, unless there is no traffic coming.'

It is not easy to follow. The confusion arises from the conglomeration of negatives. Generally, such sentences can be replaced by positive ones.

d. passive verbs. Science gives many examples of the problems. Compare the description, with passive verbs underlined, with the instructions that follow, with active, direct verbs. The instructions are much easier to follow.

Germination

In order to germinate seeds, some are planted in moist soil. Other seeds are soaked in water for a short while before they are sown. Thus water is absorbed more quickly and germination is faster.

You can germinate seeds in two ways:

1. Plant the seeds in moist soil.
2. Soak the seeds in water for a short while. The seeds will absorb water and germinate faster.

4. How to simplify

Sometimes when you are editing you can replace a difficult word or awkward phrase with another word or phrase. If you make such changes on a script someone else has written you should show that person the changes you have made and seek approval. You can do this by showing the writer the final edited typescript. A change of words may give a subtle change of meaning, or eliminate an important technical term.

Sometimes it is necessary to rewrite complete passages that are at the wrong level of difficulty. The passage in Example 25 is taken from a fifth-year secondary course in biology from Mauritius. For people at that level, is it a clear explanation? Read it carefully.

How is it that we can say that evolution has occurred? Can we actually see it happen?

Scientists have built up a picture of evolution by collecting together many different pieces of evidence from many different types of studies. Sometimes the evidence is termed DIRECT evidence because we can actually see something - such as when we find the bones of ancient species, but the vast majority of the evidence is INDIRECT - information which suggests that certain changes must have occurred, or that certain species are related or have originated from a common ancestor. For example, when we look at the blood proteins of man and the apes we find that they are similar, while if we compare the blood proteins of a man with the dog we find that they are a lot less similar. Hence this helps us to believe that man is more closely related to the apes than to other mammals like the dog.

EXAMPLE 25: From 'Evolution: Form 5 Supplementary Unit', Mauritius College of the Air, Moka, Mauritius, 1979, p.3

Comment

On the whole, it is very clear, although the second sentence of paragraph two is rather involved.

EXERCISE 3

Imagine you are explaining the concept of evolution to adults with little education. Rewrite the passage, aiming at an MFI score of between 13 and 16. (The original is 20.)

(30 minutes)

Comment

You can judge for yourself how successful your version is. You will have found that, when you simplify, you have to look first for the meaning, and choose words which express the meaning. Your words may be quite different from the original. There are dangers in crude, mechanical simplification. Very short sentences make a passage jerky and lacking in co-ordination.

5. Training writers to write simply

First, you must persuade the writer that a text may be difficult. If the writer has already drafted some material, try to identify her specific weaknesses. Discuss these, and if necessary use readability tests to demonstrate differences in levels of texts.

Once the writer has accepted the idea of writing clearly and simply, you can work together to improve the material. You can go through it together, concentrating on particular weaknesses. Awareness of the problems will help the writer change her style. You can also encourage her to be self-critical. Here are some guidelines:

- . Are paragraphs short and well-ordered?
- . Are sentences generally short?
- . Are most words short?
- . Are new words, eg technical terms, explained?
- . Are most sentences positive and direct?
- . Is the style friendly?

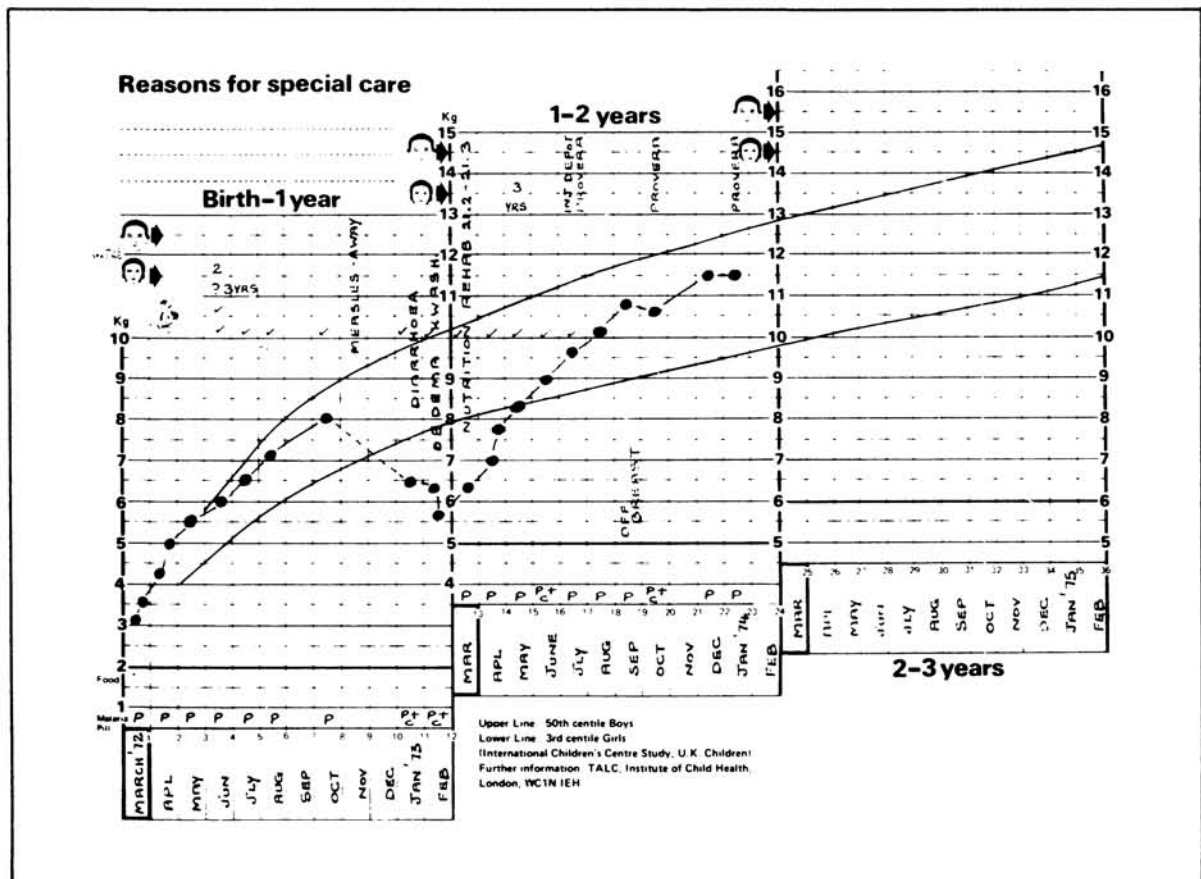
6. When is prose an unsuitable choice?

What is the best way to explain the life cycle of a mosquito? What is the clearest way to present, in sequence, the events of the Second World War? What is the easiest way to show the location of the main towns in Zambia? How would you record the growth of a child? How would you present the times of buses? These are all cases where a graphical format is usually more suitable than continuous prose. Diagrams, lists or time charts, maps, graphs and tables are all useful ways of presenting information which can replace or can complement a prose explanation. Encourage writers to arrange material in lists or charts or to use pictures and diagrams frequently. They add variety and interest to the text, as well as improving the teaching. Always make sure that illustrations are well used. A picture can be wasted if it is not closely related to the text. Every picture or diagram should be numbered, for easy reference, and should usually have a caption or title.

A learner who does not often see pictures may have difficulty in understanding them and relating them to his or her experience. In such cases, the choice and presentation of the subject is most important. The subject should be and look familiar to the reader. You may use pictures, for example, to present ideas on nutrition to mothers of small children. Urban and rural women may buy or grow different kinds of foods and serve them from different containers. Pictures for each group would have to vary accordingly.

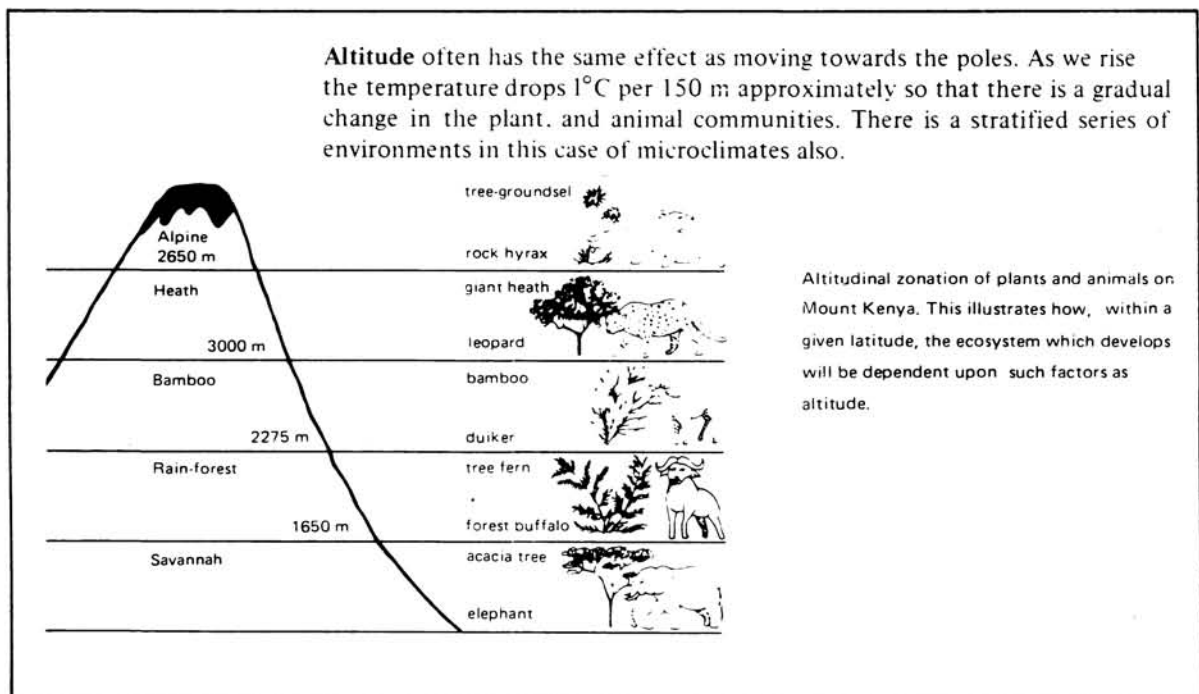
Readers may have particular difficulty in interpreting graphs and other similar diagrams. Such formats must be very carefully presented. Take care to choose an appropriate format for the information you intend to communicate.

The chart in Example 26 is an infant's weight and growth chart, now widely used all over the world. It shows a child's weight. It is very easy to use and understand, so much so that even an illiterate mother can learn to get some information from it. What makes it so clear?



EXAMPLE 26: Road to Health Chart, TALC, Institute of Child Health, London, UK.

Example 27 is a diagram from an ecology course. Where are leopards found?



EXAMPLE 27: From 'The Green Earth', National Extension College, Cambridge, UK, p.88

EXERCISE 4

Compare Examples 26 and 27. Try to explain why Example 26 is so clear, and in contrast note anything unsatisfactory about Example 27.

(10 minutes)

Comment

On the Road to Health Chart, you can see in a moment when the child is poorly, as the weight-line goes off the road. Weights are clearly marked up the side, while dates and ages are given along the bottom and top. There is space on the chart to include information. Although the chart contains a great deal of information, it is easy to use and easy to understand.

Example 27, in contrast, does not include much information. In fact, this lack of information causes me some difficulty. I understand that leopards and giant heath are found above 3000 m, but I do not know whether they occur lower down as well. The diagram gives the impression that certain creatures are only found at certain heights.

The diagram is also badly designed. The horizontal lines are all the same distance apart, while the heights given are not evenly spaced. In addition the alpine zone is given as 2650 m, clearly an error as it is a lower figure than the one below. The distinct bands do not correspond well with the text, which mentions a gradual change in the plant and animal communities. As it stands, the diagram is not much use, and needs reworking to illustrate the text effectively.

7. Common faults and how to spot them

At first, it can be difficult to identify faults in writing. The most common problem is where the overall level of language is too difficult for intended readers. You have to acquire habits of critical reading that help you work out why language is difficult. A good way to do this, although it is time-consuming, is group discussion between writers and editors. Such discussions can result in everyone becoming sensitised to points of difficulty.

You already know that you must watch out for long sentences and long words. You may like to watch out for the following points which are, in my experience, particularly common.

EXERCISE 5

Read the sentences below and see if you can identify the faults before you read the comments that follow.

1. The co-operative movement is completely independent, the government does not provide promotion or supervision.

2. In fact the co-operatives do not want them any intervention by the government in the affairs of the movement being resented as an unwarranted interference.

3. Having bought their shares, the profits should all go to the members.

4. A proportion of the gross surplus is distributed to members as interest on shares.

5. The individual member should keep a careful account of money invested and returns on shares. You should keep a notebook for this.

(5 minutes)

Comment

Each sentence contains a different problem:

1. The comma in this sentence is used wrongly, to replace a full stop. This should be two separate sentences.

2. This sentence is difficult to understand because a comma is missing, after 'them'.

3. The phrase 'having bought their shares' is hanging alone at the beginning of the sentence. Who bought the shares? Watch for sentences starting with '-ing' words, as they are often nonsense.

4. This sentence contains a number of words used in a technical sense: gross, surplus, interest, shares. They need explaining. All technical terms need introducing with a definition or explanation. Writers often forget to do this when they use common words in a technical sense.

5. This example contains two sentences. The second, starting with 'you', indicates that 'you' and 'the individual member' are the same. The first sentence is, therefore, unsatisfactory for distance teaching as it is too formal. Avoid impersonal, 'textbook' language. A second comment concerns the contrast in style between the two sentences. Formal and informal sentences side-by-side make uncomfortable reading.

If you found Exercise 5 difficult, you may like to practise a bit more fault-finding before you go on. Read two or three pages of an unedited text and note any instances of these faults. You will find that you rapidly become more observant with practice, and with an awareness of what to look for.

8. Is the style friendly?

A distance-teaching text must, as far as possible, reflect the way that a

teacher would talk with a learner face-to-face. Example 28 is from a course for unqualified primary school teachers. Is it friendly?

FOOD FOR A HEALTHY NERVOUS SYSTEM

Do you remember what the cytoplasm of cells is made of? Cytoplasm is made of 1. _____ and water.

You know that children must eat protein to build strong bone cells. And you know that protein foods help to build strong muscle cells. Because the nervous system is made of nerve cells, you know that a child needs protein to build a healthy system. A child who does not get enough protein may have trouble learning at school, because his brain did not develop well.

Calcium is also necessary for a healthy nervous system.

Beans, eggs, milk and meat will supply protein and calcium for a healthy nervous system.

ALCOHOL AND THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

Alcoholic drinks like beer, joala, wine, brandy and whiskey, affect the nervous system. You know that this is true, because you have seen how difficult it is for people who are drunk to control their muscles. They cannot walk straight, and they talk in a strange way.

People who drink too much, and keep drinking too much for a long time, may damage their nervous system so much that they will never recover.

They can no longer think properly or make proper decisions.

Remember that alcohol affects your nervous system while you are drinking. Do not try to do anything that requires control - like driving - while you are drinking. And do not drink alcoholic drinks all the time. They can do permanent damage to your nervous system and to other parts of your body.

EXAMPLE 28: From 'Health: 1 Your body and how it works', Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre/National Teacher Training College, Maseru, Lesotho, pp.32-3

EXERCISE 6

What features of Example 28 make it suitable for distance education? Note down a few points.

(5 minutes)

Comment

The friendly style stands out. You probably noted the use of 'you' to address the reader. You may also have noted the questions at the beginning, which helps create a feeling of conversation.

Some people are put off by an openly friendly text. But for every person who is put off, there will be many who appreciate the inviting warmth. Distant students become discouraged far too easily, and any strategy that helps them retain enthusiasm is to be encouraged.

Sometimes, an informal tone is unsuitable, for example when the reader must learn a precise usage for technical terms or must follow detailed instructions. Cultural factors could sometimes lead you to prefer a more formal tone. In countries where teaching is usually very formal, people may find it difficult to take seriously an informal text. If you, or the writers you are working with, feel that this may be the case in your country or context, you would be wise to do a test before acting on your feelings. Show potential students texts in both styles, and see which they prefer. Their response may differ from your expectations.

9. Is the text dull?

We have a saying in England, 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy'. All too often, an educational text is, likewise, all work and no play and extremely dry and dull. This can be tolerable in a school textbook which is used in class, but it is disastrous in a distance-teaching text.

You can combat dullness by introducing variety. Make sure that there is variety in the kinds of activities learners are asked to do. These could involve thinking, writing or doing; short exercises or long ones; reading or project work, and so on. Make sure, too, that there is variety in the presentation formats. Pictures and charts can be used as well as prose presentations. Pictures and a good layout of the text can add to the attractiveness of the text.

As for play, exercises can sometimes be in the form of word games or number games. Ideas can be developed through debates or drama, if group work is possible. But one kind of play should be treated with caution: humour. Cartoons and jokes at first sight look like a good way of lightening a text. In fact it is risky to use them. They often do not appeal to adult students, and sometimes even offend them. In some Kenyan correspondence courses, for example, a cartoon drawing of a student was used regularly to illustrate the text. Many of the real students disliked this figure, feeling that it devalued them.

What one person finds funny, the next person does not. In addition, adult students usually take education seriously, and are sensitive about any implication that their teachers do not share their seriousness. Good intentions can misfire. If you want to use cartoons, humorous approaches, or jokes, try your ideas on potential students before going to print.

10. Is the text biased?

In subjects like history and social and political sciences, questions of politics arise. The writer will have her own political opinions, which will show in the way she interprets the material. Usually a writer will draw conclusions from a reasoned consideration of all the evidence, and will leave it to students to draw their own conclusions. If you feel that

material is unbalanced and unacceptably one-sided, you should consult your advisory group.

Other kinds of bias can detract from the text or even make it offensive. These include racial, sexual or religious bias. A writer can also, without realising it, write for urban people and not rural, or for richer people and not poor. It is usually sufficient just to draw these matters to the writer's attention, and changes are not difficult to make.

EXERCISE 7

Here is a suggested home-study timetable from a student's handbook. It is supposed to help them to organise their studies. Can you see any ways in which it is biased?

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
6-7	get up	get up	get up	get up	get up	get up	get up
7-5	at work	at work	at work	at work	at work	study	relax
5-7	study	study	study	study	study	relax	relax
7-8	eat	eat	eat	eat	eat	eat	eat
8-10	study	study	relax	study	study	relax	relax

(5 minutes)

Comment

This is obviously a timetable for someone with a regular job, such as office work. It also assumes that the reader has no home responsibilities: no cooking, no housework, no children to care for. It is a sexist timetable that takes no account of women's needs. It also fails to take account of any religious commitment people may have. In fact, it is implicitly a timetable for Christians, as it gives Sunday as a day of rest. Moslems or Jews are not catered for.

This example demonstrates how easily unintentional bias can enter into a text. We have to make sure that examples and suggestions are sufficiently varied to avoid such problems as far as possible.

Summary

This unit has shown how distance-teaching texts can be more effective if they have:

- . clear, simple language
- . friendly style
- . a variety of presentation formats

We have examined a number of ideas and examples, and you have practised amending and simplifying text. We have also considered how an editor can work productively with a writer to improve language and presentation.

ASSIGNMENT H

For this assignment, return to the three passages that you scored for readability in the last unit. Rewrite them, following the guidance in this unit. Score them again, and then show the passages to a colleague, explain what you have been trying to do, and discuss the results.