Lecture 1

1.1 Clutter is the most common disease of writing.

1.2 Example: the airline pilot who announces that he is

> "presently anticipating experiencing considerable precipitation"

really means . . .

1.3 Example: in the 1960s the president of a university wrote a letter to mollify the alumni after a spell of campus unrest. He wrote

> "You are probably aware that we have been experiencing very considerable potentially explosive expressions of dissatisfaction on issues only partially related."

What he wanted to say was . . .

1.4 Example: here is a US government memo from 1942, regarding a wartime blackout order:

> "Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all Federal buildings and non-Federal buildings occupied by the Federal government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination."

Franklin D. Roosevelt tried to convert this memo into English: "Tell them," Roosevelt said, "that in buildings where they have to keep the work going to put something across the windows."

1.5 The secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components.

1.6 Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, weaken the strength of a sentence.

1.7 Typical long words that can be made short:

assistance	help
numerous	many
facilitate	ease
individual	man or woman
remainder	rest
initial	first
implement	do
sufficient	enough
attempt	try
referred to as	called

1.8 Writers must therefore constantly ask: what am I trying to say? Surprisingly often they don't know. Then they must look at what they have written and ask: have I said it? Is it clear to someone encountering the subject for the first time?

1.9 Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it *is* hard.

1.10 The answer is to clear our heads of clutter. Clear thinking becomes clear writing: one can't exist without the other.

1.11 A short guide to writing about events, as in "What I did during the last summer" kind of essay (from [AC97, pg. 24]).

- It tells an entertaining story.
- It is vivid—letting readers see what makes the event as well as the people and places memorable for the writer.
- It is purposeful, trying to give readers an understanding of why this particular event was significant in the writer's life.
- It includes self-presentation but not unwanted self-disclosure.
- It can lead readers to think in new ways about their own experience or about how other people's lives differ from their own.

1.12 Description of events has to be entertaining to capture the attention of the reader.

1.13 Who is this elusive creature, the reader? The reader is someone with the attention span of about 30 seconds—a person assailed by many forces competing for attention: TV, DVDs, CDs, video games, the Internet, e-mail, cell phones, iPods, fitness programs, a pool, a lawn and that most potent of competitors, sleep.

1.14 We must use words judiciously. For people whose first language is not English, there is a way of assessing the level of abstraction of a word. Here is a simplified guideline.

- **Anglo-Saxon-derived** word for a thing—*cow*, for example—is typically down-to-earth, simple, ordinary; it makes you think of an actual individual animal. It's from the same stratum of our vocabulary as all those short, rude "four-letter" words.
- **Norman-French-derived** words tend to seem more abstract, less individual: *beef*, for example, which we more often use for the food than for the animal itself.
- **Latin** words is a stratum of words sitting on top of the French-derived vocabulary. This level is even *more* abstract: *bovine*, for example—which we use either in scientific descriptions ("bovine spongiform encephalopathy"), for abstract cow-like qualities, or in elevated, consciously poetic descriptions.

These different strata of vocabulary are available to any writer in English, and the fact that he can choose among them means that he has an enormous range of different effects available to him.

1.15 At first it might be difficult to apply these different connotations in your own writing, but at least you will be able to recognize them in other writers. ([Kan06])

1.16 We now review some elements of style. Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding **'s**. Thus:

Charle's friend
Burns's poems
Soltys's course
the witch's malice

Exceptions are the possessives of ancient proper names ending in **-es** and **-is**, the possessive Jesus', and such forms as:

for conscience' sake
for righteousness' sake

1.17 The pronominal possessives *hers, its, theirs, yours, ours* have no apostrophe. Indefinite pronouns, however, use the apostrophe to show possession:

one's rights
somebody else's umbrella

1.18 A common error is to write *it's* for *its*, or vice versa. The first is a contraction, meaning "it is." The second is a possessive.

It's a wise dog that scratches its own fleas.

1.19 Use the proper case of pronoun. The personal pronouns, as well as the pronoun who, change form as they function as subject or object.

Will Jane or he be hired, do you think?
The culprit, it turned out, was he.
We heavy eaters would rather walk than ride.
Who knocks?
Give this work to whoever looks idle.
Virgil Soames is the candidate **who** we think will win [We think ***he*** will win]
Virgil Soames is the candidate **whom** we hope to elect [We hope to elect ***him***]

1.20 In general, avoid "understood" verbs by supplying them.

I think Horace admires Jessica more than I **do**.
Polly loves cake more than **she loves** me.

References

[AC97] Rise B. Axelrod and Charles R. Cooper. *The St. Martin Guide to WRITING*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 5 edition, 1997.

[Kan06] Elizabeth Kantor. *English and American Literature*. Regnery Publishing, 2006.