

Can the Fundamental Principles of Non-fiction Writing Be Applied to Fiction?

by Philip Yaffe

I have never written fiction and never intended to. My 40-year career has been in journalism and marketing communication. However, a few months ago someone who had read my book on expository (non-fiction) writing and speaking contacted me to ask if I could help her with some fiction projects. I was inclined to say "no", because I couldn't really see what my kind of writing had to do with hers. By chance, a few weeks earlier I had come across a compilation of comments on writing by noted novelists and was struck by the similarity of what they had to say and what I had say. So I decided to give it a try.

The lady asked me to look at a novel she had written a few years earlier. We will first analyze the prologue of the novel according to some key principles and practices of expository writing, then look at how it was revised.

But first, what are these key principles? There really are only three of them. However, if properly understood and applied, they cover most writing situations, both creative and expository.

A. Clarity Principle

Being clear is not a matter of personal appreciation. According to the clarity principle, to be clear you must do three things:

1. Emphasize what is of key importance.
2. De-emphasize what is of secondary importance.
3. Eliminate what is of no importance.

If you follow the formula, before you start writing you must first determine what is of key importance, i.e. what are the key ideas you want your readers to take away from your text?

This is not always easy. It is far simpler to say that everything is of key importance, so you put in everything you have. However, unless you do the work of defining what you really want your readers to know, they won't do it for you. They will simply get lost in your text and either give up or come out the other end not knowing what they have read.

Next, you must be certain to de-emphasize what is of secondary importance. Why? Because if you want your readers to recognize and retain the key ideas, you don't want them to get lost in the details. Details (information of secondary importance) explain and support the key ideas. They must never overwhelm them.

Finally, you must eliminate what is of no importance. Why? Because any information that adds nothing to explaining and supporting the key ideas will tend to obscure them. This is exactly the opposite of what you want.

B. Conciseness Principle

According to the conciseness principle, your text should be as:

1. Long as necessary

2. Short as possible

"As long as necessary" means covering all the key ideas you identified under "clarity", and all the information of secondary importance needed to explain and support them. Note that nothing is said about the number of words, because it is irrelevant. If it takes 500 words to be "as long as necessary", then 500 words must be used. If it takes 1500 words, then this is all right, too.

"As short as possible" means staying as close to the minimum as you can, because all words beyond the minimum tend to damage clarity. Subconsciously, readers will continually be trying to understand why those words are there, and will be continually failing because they serve no purpose.

Anything that doesn't add to the text, subtracts from it.

C. Density Principle

According to the density principle, your text should contain:

1. Precise information
2. Logically linked

Using precise information aids clarity. For example, if you say it is a "hot" day, what do you mean? One reader might interpret hot as 24° C, while another might interpret it as 36° C. However, if you say the temperature is 28° C, there is no room for interpretation - or misinterpretation.

Using precise information also generates confidence, because it assures your readers that you really know what you are talking about. This helps to hold their attention, making it easier to get your points across.

To these three fundamental principles of expository writing, I would like to add a specific technique. Analyze each sentence or passage you write to see what question it may raise in the reader's mind. Then answer it!

Usually these questions will be subconscious; the reader won't even be aware of them. However, a lengthening list of "what is this?" and "why is that?" will inevitably cause the reader's mind to wander away from what you are trying to say. When it has wandered far enough, it is unlikely to come back.

The reader will complain that the text is shallow, boring, insipid or confusing. And he will be right.

Analysis

Below you will find the "Analysis" of the prologue of the novel. For best benefit, you should probably read the text straight through, ignoring the comments in parentheses. Next, re-read with the comments. Finally, compare this original with the "Revision", produced by applying the above principles.

The purpose of the prologue is to:

- 1) Introduce the principal characters
- 2) Outline the plot
- 3) Generate a sense of mystery and expectation

These are the key ideas; everything in the text should bend to them

Aurora searched for his signal as the 737 taxied past her. (Where is she? Could she possibly be on the tarmac?). She saw nothing, but her belief didn't waver. (Is she expecting some kind of major event?)

As the aircraft rolled almost out of sight, she noticed two distinct flashes. It was Mitch. As always, he'd remembered. Almost a year ago, they'd devised a system of code to communicate from the terminal to the plane when she'd complained that she couldn't see in the tiny jet's windows – a flash of his silver business card case meant that he loved her and he'd be back soon. (Hardly the major event suggested earlier.)

And she knew he would, considering the long-awaited engagement ring he'd just given her before he boarded – a solitary white diamond with heart shaped clusters on both sides and smaller diamonds embedded on the band. (Would a man really give a woman an engagement ring at an airport just before flying off to leave her for a week?)

Over fifteen minutes passed and finally the plane's engines whined into action. Heaving greatly, the Rolls Royce motors overcame the aircraft's stagnant weight and the immense mass accelerated down the long tarmac strip. Once having gained speed, it only took a small flick of the wing's flaps and the steel structure effortlessly rose into the air and was magically in flight. (This seems a rather dramatic description of a plane taking off, particularly for people like Aurora and Mitch, who are used to flying. What is the purpose of this description?)

Aurora breathed a sigh of relief that was echoed by the few relatives that had remained on both sides of her – a petite woman, a young girl, a man. The plane was away safely. (More drama about the airplane taking off. Is this paragraph really necessary?)

She dabbed her forehead with a handkerchief Mitch had given her. GMA it was initialized – Greg Mitchell Adderby – silver-haired, he was her boss, her mentor, her first real love (how old is she?). She breathed in the Antheus scent that still clung to it – his scent. Then she rubbed the sweat of her palm (still concerned about the takeoff?) against the jeans he'd bought for her at Harrods in London on their first excursion together, her first trip out of America. Ruby red denim. They were his favorite color, just like the ties he always wore. That was only a year ago.

She'd become so much a part of Mitch's life since then, his wisdom and maturity a guide to her (how old is Mitch?). He had promised to protect her (against what?). And she marveled at the company he co-founded (with whom?), Rad Foods International, a distribution company for fresh and irradiated fruits and vegetables, a place where she could work happily, sometimes even excel.

But now he was gone. What would she do for a week? (Doesn't she work in the company?) How she wished she hadn't had to stay behind for the awards dinner, Young Business Designer of the Year. But she was proud of the achievement and the recognition. In his absence, Mitch had arranged for Gerard Marques, their lead salesman, to accompany her. "There's no one else I'd rather rely on," he had told her. (Aurora seems to have won award. For what? What kind of work does she do?)

On the plane, Mitch fumbled nervously with his briefcase (why "nervously"?). Then he stared out the window and caught a glimpse of Aurora in the oversized terminal window. Long, flowing, dark brown hair. Long waist, long, slender limbs. Even from a distance, the brightly dyed jeans and

fire-engine angora sweater that clung to her svelte frame were a beacon to him. "My ray of sunshine," he whispered, and breathed deeply, pensively. (Where is Mitch going? Where is he leaving from?)

As her tall figure dwindled to a mere dot, he took off his seatbelt and turned his neck almost backwards, straining to see her for a few more seconds.

Suddenly, the plane jerked. He was lurched abruptly, and a searing pain bolted from his head down his spine. He faced forward again and rubbed his sore neck. "Oh," he cried, as the plane wrenched him another excruciating time, on this occurrence with even more force.

"For God sake man, get your head down," a bearded man next to him yelled.

(Why bearded? This seems to be a gratuitous detail, shifting reader attention away from Mitch.)

"What?"

"Get your head down."

Confused, Mitch obeyed the strict command and plunged his chest to his knees, gripping onto the silver card case through the chest pocket of his black Armani suit (is this dramatic moment an appropriate time to describe what Mitch is wearing?).

"Fire," someone screamed from the economy section. "It's the engine." (Why economy section? Should we assume that Mitch is in business or first class? With the plane in crisis, does it really matter?)

"Place your head between your knees and be calm," a shrill female voice wailed over the loudspeaker. (Would a trained stewardess "wail" in a "shrill voice"?) Her words were barely audible over the chaos.

As the aircraft reeled again, a luggage rack jarred opened above them, and a vivid fuchsia bag smashed into the aisle, its zipper bursting – bras, socks, and underwear spilling out. So steep was the jet's angle now that the clothes tumbled down the length of the aisle with the ease of marbles. (Enumerating the contents of the bag shifts reader attention away from Mitch. Is it relevant?).

Next to Mitch, two women were sobbing hysterically. "This can't be happening," one screamed. (Once again, reader attention is shifted away from Mitch. Why?)

Unexpectedly, the doors of another overhead compartment swung open, this time hurling yellow cups onto the already frightened passengers (Is this sentence necessary?).

"Put on your seatbelt..." the bearded man shouted to Mitch from beside him. His hands fumbled to obey.

On the ground, Aurora swore that the plane lurched unevenly. It wasn't ascending anymore. Suddenly, it made another wrenching motion and then pitched itself downward.

"My God," she cried, looking fearfully at the dangerous angle. Everyone around her at the Niagara Falls terminal gaped at the scene. (Why this shift of attention away from Aurora just when it has been re-established?) The plane was only a few hundred yards off the ground, with no hope of enough room to level out for a smooth landing.

Suddenly, the aircraft tilted sideways and turned back towards the building. A colossal burst of fire spewed from the engine.

"They're gonna die!" someone screamed.

"No!" Aurora pleaded as the metallic mass dropped to the asphalt with a force that violently quaked the ground, as if a Goliath was tumbling to earth. (This seems to be a gratuitous, distracting metaphor. Is it necessary?) The plane's wing scraped along the airstrip with a deafening noise, and thick choking puffs spilled out of the hull.

An explosion blew out the left jet, and flames began raging.

Aurora was sure that Mitch was in one of the windows. She was with him – she envisaged the last time they'd eaten a romantic dinner together, the last time he'd snuck a kiss at work, the last time they'd made love– He was reaching out to her. (This seems a distracting interlude during a crisis. Is it necessary?)

Finally, the lamed giant skidded to a standstill on the tarmac just in front of the window where she stood.

The scene continues in very much the same manner, i.e. raising questions that aren't being answered, unnecessary shifts of attention, distracting details, etc.

Revision of the Prologue

Here is the revision. See how application of the three expository writing principles (clarity, conciseness, density) and the question & answer technique have altered it.

Aurora looked out of the terminal window, searching for his signal as the 737 taxied past her. She hadn't yet seen it but she knew she would. As the aircraft rolled almost out of sight, she caught sight of what she had been waiting for, two distinct flashes. It was Mitch.

Almost a year earlier, she had complained that she couldn't see him through the tiny jet's windows, so they had devised their private signally system. A flash of his silver business card case meant that he loved her and would soon return.

And there it was. They had used the system many times over the past year, but this time was special. Just before boarding, he had given her what she

had been praying for, an engagement ring. It was in the form of solitary white diamond with heart shaped clusters on both sides and smaller diamonds embedded on the band.

Mitch had planned to give it to her after his return, but as he said, "I just couldn't wait.

"That was just like Mitch," Aurora thought. Generally cool, calm and methodical, but capable of occasional flashes of appropriate spontaneity.

The moment he put it on her finger, all of Aurora's girlish dreams about an elegant candle-lit dinner, a romantic moonlight stroll along the river, and maybe even her suitor down on one knee, instantly vanished. Mitch was as eager as she. That was all that mattered.

At the age of 26, she had of course been in love before. But never like this. It couldn't have been like this.

The plane rested on the tarmac a good 15 minutes. Finally, its powerful Rolls Royce engines roared into action. It began taxiing down the runway, gathering the speed necessary to lift its heavy mass into the sky.

Aurora withdrew the handkerchief Mitch had given her from her purse. It bore the initials GMA - Gregory Mitchell Adderby. She briefly pressed it to her nose and breathed in the Antheus scent that still clung to it – his scent. Oh yes, she had been in love before, but never like this.

Just over a year ago, Mitch had been only her boss, but then became her mentor, her lover. And now her soon-to-be husband.

She touched the engagement ring he had put on her slender finger less than 30 minutes ago. Each time Mitch had gone away before, the days had dragged. But how was she going to get through the coming week now.

Mitch was on his way to the Young Business Designer of the Year awards dinner in Chicago, where he was to be honored. At 31, Mitch was still a boyish-looking if silver-haired entrepreneur. Six years ago, he and a university buddy had founded Rad Foods International, a rapidly growing distribution company for fresh and irradiated fruits and vegetables. Still small compared to its competitors, the company was generally recognized a real comer and would soon take its place among the big boys.

On the plane, Mitch was at a window seat, head turned back trying to catch a last glimpse of Aurora through the oversized windows of the Niagara Falls air terminal. Flowing auburn hair, long waist, slender limbs. Even at this distance, he could make out the ruby jeans and fire-engine red angora sweater he had bought her a few weeks ago when they were in London. "My beacon, my ray of sunshine," he whispered.

As Aurora's svelte figure dwindled to a dot, Mitch took off his seatbelt and started to open his briefcase. Suddenly, the plane lurched and he was thrown forward, hitting his head against the seat in front of him. He straightened up, rubbing his sore neck and just beginning to feel pain radiating down his body. The plane lurched again.

"For God sake man, get your head down!" yelled the man across the aisle.

"What?"

"Get your head down, you idiot! The plane is going to crash!"

There was no doubting the authority in the voice, so Mitch obeyed. He thrust his chest to his knees, gripping the silver card case through the chest pocket of his jacket.

"Fire! It's the engine!" someone screamed.

Then a sturdily dispassionate but slightly wavering female voice came over the loudspeaker: "Ladies and Gentlemen, please place your head between your knees and remain calm."

As the plane lurched again, an overhead luggage rack jarred opened. A fuchsia lady's traveling case crashed to the floor, spilling out a rainstorm of equally colorful intimate apparel – bras, panties, stockings, nighties.

"Quite a show," Mitch thought, trying to calm his rapidly fraying nerves. But the respite lasted only a moment.

"Put your damn seatbelt on!" thundered the man across the aisle. Mitch fumbled to comply, but never quite made it.

On the ground, Aurora was watching the scene in horror. The plane was no longer rising. Instead, it was wobbling from side to side as if trying to make up its mind which way to go. Abruptly, it pitched downward.

"Oh my God," Aurora cried, her heart pounding and droplets of sweat pearling on her forehead.

Suddenly, there was a bright flash and a torrent of fire and smoke gushed from the plane's fuselage.

"It's going to crash! They're all going to die!" someone shouted.

"No!" Aurora pleaded as the stricken aircraft plummeted out of the sky. Just before hitting the ground, the pilot regained some kind of control. He sent it along the runway. It screamed and screeched as its crippled undercarriage gouged huge trenches in the tarmac along its path.

Another explosion, more fire and smoke. Finally, the plane skidded to a stop just in front of the window where Aurora was standing.

To answer the question at the beginning: Can the fundamental principles of non-fiction (clarity, conciseness, density) be applied to fiction? Indeed, they can. And with considerable effect. So if you have always wanted to write fiction but felt it was beyond you, why not give it a try? You may be better than you think.

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