Writing for the reader

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"Yeah. Streetstyle is happening. It's raw. Aggressive. Fluid. And the key word is STREET—so if there ever are street contests they should be held on the natural environment—the street. Let's keep it OUTSIDE. Rip it up.—A.J." (Jenkins 1986).

Now THAT is writing for the reader. That's my son-in-law A.J., writing for the typical reader of *Freestylin'* magazine, who is a 14-year-old who has gone over the handlebars once too often without a helmet.

This paper is about "Writing for the Reader," from Bernard DeVoto's advice to his students: **"Write for the reader, never for yourself"** (Stegner 1974). And I might add, not for *JRM* or *Rangelands* but for the **reader** of *JRM* or *Rangelands.*

The next question: What is the appropriate style for readers of *JRM* or *Rangelands?* The easy answer is "the way we've always written." When Don Quixote told Sancho Panza to get on with the story without so many diversions, Panza replied, "The way I'm telling it is the way all stories are told in my country. It isn't fair for your worship to ask me to get new habits" (quoted in Zimmerman & Clark 1987).

The way "stories are told in *our* country" was established in the 17th century (Wallsgrove 1987). Scientists had to distinguish themselves from politicians, poets, philosophers, and theologians; they had to prove they were telling the truth about the material world, long before they had any impact on it. They wrote in the first person, what "I" did, to indicate they were reporting personal experience, not what Aristotle or some other ancient had said. They reported what happened when they performed an experiment; convinced readers that it had happened; and convinced readers they should care what happened. Those are still the essentials; everything else is style.

Everything Else Is Style

And style changes. Look at Charles Darwin's description of what happens when grazing is excluded:

> ...the land having been enclosed, so that cattle could not enter ...self-sown firs are now springing up in multitudes...In one square yard...I counted thirty-two little trees; and one of them, with twenty-six rings of growth, had during many years tried to raise its head above the stems of the heath, and had failed. No wonder that, as soon as the land was enclosed, it became thickly clothed with vigorously growing young firs. (Darwin 1958).

Now look at a modern example:

> The relict site (RM) had significantly more herbaceous vegetation than all the other sites (Table 1), which were not significantly different from one another. The reduced cover of Indian ricegrass [*Oryzopsis hymenoides* (R. & S.) Ricker], a very palatable grass, was the primary reason for this difference. The cover of galleta grass [*Hilaria jamesii* (Torr.) Benth.], a grass tolerant to grazing, was not significantly different between sites, but as the total herbaceous vegetation cover decreased, the relative percent cover of this species increased. (Jeffries & Klopatek 1987)

The scientist has disappeared (no more "I counted"). Scientific names, complete with authority, reassure the reader that the writer really knows his plants, and data have been relegated to a table and subjected to statistical analysis. All this interferes with narrative flow; we think we need it to reassure the reader that we know what we're talking about, but it might better be in appendices.

Day (1979) denies the existence of style; he says "...the preparation of a scientific paper has almost nothing to do with writing....A scientific paper is not 'literature.'...if the ingredients are properly organized, the paper will virtually write itself." That last statement alone casts considerable doubt on Day as an authority.

In contrast, Knoll (1988) in his review of the book *The Young Earth* applauds the author's style, and reminisces of an era when the term "scientific literature" was not a contradiction in terms—like "quiet Texan."

So style exists, else why the proliferation of "Style Manuals"? And why the proliferation of styles? For example, the pontifical:

> Being a new approach altogether to the range deterioration problem it should not be surprising that SGM is totally different from any of the approaches that were in use. The differences are too many to list here but two which have caused the greatest unrest in the range profession are the facts that:
>
> 1. No matter how bad the range deterioration there is never a need to reduce stock numbers to start the reclamation process. As a general rule, the conventional or government-prescribed stocking rates can safely be doubled in the first year of operation as long as adequate time control is brought into the grazing handling. Furthermore this doubling of government or conventional rates can be done regardless of how poor the range condition is at the time. (Savory 1983)

The author is absolutely certain of his position ("altogether", "totally", "no matter", "regardless") and cites no data or references.

The conventional:

> The stocking rate recommended by the Soil Conservation Service (SCS 1986) is 36.0 steer-days/ha. Net profit at 1986 prices and the SCS-recommended rate = $20.90 per ha (Fig. 5). Increasing to the optimum stocking rate of 57.6 steer-days/ha (a 60% increase) produced a 16% increase in net profit. Thus stocking rates recommended by SCS might be increased profitably, at least in the short term; but this is possible with all systems, not just with short-duration rotation systems. Potential short-term increases in livestock gain must be weighed against potential long-term decreases in range condition and productivity (Hart et al. 1988).

Note the flat style and the absence of "absolute" words; data, calculations, and references are expected to speak for themselves.

The popular:

> Claims for range improvement in southern Africa through intensive SDG at double conventional stocking rates are not founded in fact. To the contrary, evidence in literature from Zimbabwe and elsewhere in southern Africa indicates that it is impossible to have both heavy stocking and improvement in range condition. In fact, studies of SDG involving 12–16 units at only medium rates of stocking have shown no greater range improvement than conventional systems. Moreover, there are numerous cases where double stocking (with cartwheel systems) on a long-term basis has led to severe degradation. (Skovlin 1987).

Supporting evidence and data are cited, but not explicitly; language is less formal; and transition words move the narrative along.

And finally, the barn-burner:

> A modern equivalent of Wovoka has appeared to show besieged ranchers the way. His name is Allan Savory, a man who teaches the rancher that he can bring back the grass by doubling his cattle numbers....More than any other reason, Savory owes his success thus far to the utter failure of today's range management establishment....The allegiance of the range management professionals to the cow and to the maintenance of the rancher in his traditional position of dominance on the public lands now threatens to make the entire archaic structure collapse. (Carr 1986)

Lots of fun to write, and to read if you already agree with it, but not likely to convince anyone; the writer is writing for herself, not the reader. No data are given, the language is inflammatory, and the author is completely and utterly convinced that she is right, just as in the pontifical style.

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What, Then, Is The Appropriate Style?

What, then, is the appropriate style? Irmscher (1976) says style should be based on the four writer-reader relationships: the specialist talking to the specialist, the specialist to the generalist, the generalist to the specialist, and the generalist to the generalist. He omits the most common of all: the specialist talking to himself.

A more useful classification, also by Irmscher, identifies six styles:

1. Legal & technical
2. Popular reporting
3. Learned discourse
4. Popular discourse
5. Public address
6. Private discourse

Range writers are most likely to be concerned with 1, legal & technical writing; 3, learned discourse; and 4, popular discourse. Here is an example (Zimmerman and Clark 1987) of the same material in these three styles:

Technical report (legal & technical writing): Standard measurements of length of six newborn swift foxes *(Vulpes velox)* taken in the study area were 15.5 cm, 14.7 cm, 16.5 cm, 14.9 cm, 15.0 cm and 16.2 cm (Smith 1965).

Script for wildlife biologists (learned discourse): Newborn swift fox in the study area averaged 15 and a half centimeters in length.

Script for television audience (popular discourse): Newborn swift fox pups would fit in the palm of your hand.

Legal and technical writing for *JRM* and other journals uses a specialized vocabulary, which permits a highly compressed style. The writer is a specialist writing for specialists and can assume that explanations of terms are unnecessary because the reader knows what he's talking about. On the other hand the writer is expected to give detailed accounts of materials, methods, and measurements; as in the 17th century, the writer must convince the reader that he writes from evidence, not hearsay.

Learned discourse for *Rangelands* and similar publications uses a more general vocabulary and a less compressed style. The specialist is writing for specialists in other fields as well as his own. There is less concern for detailed descriptions of methods and more concern for helping the reader to follow a train of thought. Transitional words and phrases like "on the other hand" and "therefore" are used; examples are given; sentence structure and length are varied.

Popular discourse for farm and other magazines lets the writer's presence show through. First person, personal experiences, narrative style, uncomplicated sentences, figures of speech and other rhetorical devices are used. Some of us are uncomfortable with figures of speech; ask us "What's a metaphor?" and we're likely to answer "To keep cows in."

Points of Interest

I'm not going to discuss many specifics of style; that's what style manuals are for. But I'm not going to miss an opportunity to bring up a few style points that interest or irritate me (note the personal touch; that is popular discourse).

His, Hers, Its

Consider gender bias, sexist language, et al. I like the approach of van Leunen (1979):

> My expository style relies heavily on the exemplary singular, and the construction 'everybody...his' therefore comes up frequently. This 'his' is generic, not gendered. 'His or her' becomes clumsy with repetition and suggests that 'his' alone elsewhere is masculine, which it isn't. 'Her' alone draws attention to itself and distracts from the topic at hand. 'Their' solves the problem neatly but substitutes another. 'Ter' is bolder than I am ready for. 'One's' defeats the purpose of the construction, which is meant to be vivid and particular. 'Its' is too harsh a joke. Rather than play hob with the language, we feminists might adopt the position of pitying men for being forced to share their pronouns around.

This may be too cavalier an approach, but you can perhaps move too far in the other direction; Zimmerman and Clark (1987) present a 2-page table of rules for avoiding gender bias. But they offer some good suggestions:

1. If you know the gender of the person, use the appropriate pronoun.
2. Use titles instead of pronouns. Use gender-neutral titles when good ones are available; avoid awkward ones such as "cowperson."
3. Replace possessives with articles or use plurals: not "Every branch chief should submit his report" but "Every branch chief should submit a report" or "Branch chiefs should submit their reports", but not "Every branch chief should submit their report."

"I did it!"

It is not, repeat **not** "unscientific" to use first person and active voice. Both were used for centuries in scientific writing, but lately all research has been done by disembodied spirits: "Plots were clipped," "It was concluded," etc. "We clipped plots," "I concluded" are far superior.

Can't Stand Alone

Do not make statements unsupported by data or references. A recent article in *JRM* (Ethridge et al. 1987) stated, without either, "The rotation system was assumed to increase stocking capacity...by 30%," proceeded to build a complex economic analysis on this assumption, and concluded that "Several range improvement practices were shown to be generally profitable...These include a rotation grazing system...".

On the other hand, do not hang unnecessary references on statements that are common knowledge. A reviewer recently asked me for a reference to support the statement that "milk provided most of (nursing calves') nutritional needs"; the editor of the journal suggested I refer the reviewer to "Dial-a-Cow."

Play It Again

This suggests that reviewers' comments should not be swallowed whole, at least not without a grain of salt. But revision is a necessary part of writing; few of us can rip out perfect manuscripts on the first try. Hemingway said: "Easy writing makes hard reading"; and DeVoto often advised his students: "Just run it through the typewriter again" (Stegner 1974).

Style manuals can help you write better: Day (1979), van Leunen (1979), and the ever- reliable Strunk & White (1979). But the best way to learn good writing is to read good writing, designed for the same readers you're trying to reach. "You'll never be Leo Tolstoy!" Lucy jeered at Snoopy. And we shouldn't try to be. But we might try to be Charles Darwin, Carl Sagan, or Alan Moorhead.

And finally, learn by doing: write, write, write. I'll close with another quote from son-in-law A.J. (Jenkins 1986). A hot-dog wrote to the magazine that he was going to be the raddest, most aggro free-styler around; he had bought "the hottest scoot in town" and now what should he do? And A.J. replied, "Ride."

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