

Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace (5th ed.)

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Abstract

Book review of *Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (5th ed.) by Joseph M. Williams.

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Reviews

Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace (5th ed.)

Joseph M. Williams. 1997. Addison-
Wesley Educational Publishers.
ISBN 0-673-98243-2. 286 pp.

This book is used as a text for a writing course in The Technical Communications Program at the University of Minnesota. It is also on the recommended reading list of Stephen Wilbers, a writing consultant in Minneapolis and the author of *Writing for Business* and *Writing by Wilbers*.

The title, *Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, accurately summarizes the works. Four of the "ten keys to a clear and graceful style" on the inside cover page tell you how to write in a:

- Thoughtful style: "Remember that your readers probably know less than you do about what you are asking them to read, and so you must be clearer than you think you need to be."
- Correct style: "Write not as the grammarians say you must write, but as writers you admire actually write." That's liberating for those of us with little interest in becoming grammarians.
- Emphatic style: "End your sentences on your rhetorically most salient, most powerful words." Jim Hayes, ACE member who's been a writing consultant for the *Los Angeles Times*, made somewhat the same point at a writing session during an international ACE meeting a few years ago. He talked about how eye movement research shows we tend to pick up on the first and last words of sentences and paragraphs. To put it another way, bury the less essential words in the middle of sentences and paragraphs.

- Pointed style: "Cut, cut again, then cut once more." William Zinsser, (*On Writing Well*), says he makes his students cut their original story in half, then cut it in half again. The best story I heard about being concise, though, was given by a consultant to scientists who deal with television: People who are good enough, he said, can explain how an atomic reactor works in 10 seconds.

Many of the examples and exercises are detailed. For example, Williams does an extended analysis of the style of Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. He talks about how Lincoln wrote various passages, then how he could have written them in a style more close to his first inaugural address or Gettysburg Address.

I find both Strunk and White (*The Elements of Style*) and Zinsser's *On Writing Well* the two basic writing references most useful for both personal reference and teaching-training endeavors. For news writing, I also like the *Associated Press Guide to News Writing*. But the Williams book can be a valuable addition to your reference library especially for delving into the nuances of style.

In the preface, Williams suggests reading the book slowly: "It is not an amiable essay that you can read in a sitting or two." That's true especially when compared to *On Writing Well*, which you can read in an amiable sitting or two and have more fun in the process.

Williams says his book is not about writing; it is about rewriting. How true, and we need to do more of it.

But no one who really knows promises it will be easy. Williams quotes Samuel Johnson: "What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure." Or, we might add, may not be read at all or even noticed in today's busy world.

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