

TEN WRITERLY REMINDERS

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1. AN ESSAY IS AN ARGUMENT

Every sentence, therefore, should contribute to the support of your case.

2. THE CARDINAL VIRTUE OF SCHOLARLY WRITING IS CLARITY

Your argument cannot be persuasive, incisive or elegant, if it is not already lucid. It will not be clear if it has not been planned, and re-planned and redrafted, several times over. But make certain that you possess a clear understanding of what the question asks before you begin; clear writing depends upon clear reading.

3. THE CARDINAL SIN IS INACCURACY

Misquotation and confusing critics' names gives the impression of carelessness. Do not expect a reader's rapt attention if you leave evidence of your own disinterest in the material.

4. SHOW, DON'T TELL

Illustrate non-obvious assertions about the text with quotations, explaining clearly what you mean to show, and how it supports your point. A good rule of thumb is to discuss your quotation at the same length as the quoted text. Someone who hasn't read the text in question should be satisfied, from the content of your essay alone, that the point you make is valid. (This is often a useful proof-reading exercise: have a friend *who hasn't read the texts you discuss* read your essay, and ask if they are persuaded by your argument. As readers we know logical coherence and persuasive use of evidence when we see it.)

5. LESS IS MORE

"Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline" – but make every word *count*. (Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style* (NY: Macmillan, 1959), p. 17)

6. THE ART OF WRITING IS RE-WRITING

Writing well is an extremely labour-intensive activity. Read each sentence you compose from the perspective of a sceptical critic – is it clear? Is it relevant? Does it serve your argument in the best way possible? Be honest. Then re-write. And re-read. And revise. After a bout of frenzied late-night writing, re-read everything in the cold light of morning. Do not be surprised if your ideas no longer seem as brilliantly conceived, or as beautifully expressed. Be usefully humbled, not frustrated, at the maddening difficulty.

7. BE SPECIFIC. (USE CONCRETE, DEFINITE WORDS)

To give your writing vigour and vitality, "prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract" (15).

8. USE THE ACTIVE VOICE, AND POSITIVE SENSE

Nearly always prefer 'Hamlet saw the Ghost' over 'The Ghost was seen by Hamlet'.
"Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colourless, hesitating, noncommittal language." (14)

9. DO NOT OVERSTATE

"When you overstate, the reader will be instantly on guard, and everything that has preceded your overstatement, as well as everything that follows it, will be suspect in his mind because he has lost confidence in your judgement or your poise." (59)

10. PROOFREAD!

90% of mechanical errors can be avoided by simply, and carefully, reading your final draft for accuracy before submission.

What is meant by 'show, don't tell' or 'analyse, don't describe'?

DESCRIPTION

ANALYSIS

Tony Harrison's poetry is concerned with issues of social conflict. His work makes frequent reference to labour history and employs familiar signifiers of working-class community.

[Facts; self-evident]

Substantiating argument would likely be....

[Non-existent; a list of observations]

Harrison's personae are often conflicted about their class identities, and these tensions are reflected in the language of his poetry. We might say that Harrison *dramatises* social problems at the level of poetic 'voice'.

[Interpretation; hypothesis]

[Supportive of this point, but concerned mainly with 'proving' this interpretation, rather than developing it further.]

Harrison's ambivalence about his own class position stifles the potential radicalism of his poetry. Because the poet is unable to wholeheartedly identify with the oppressed, there is a failure of commitment in his work, at the levels of content and technique alike. Harrison is no fence-sitter, but his work does reinforce a sense of historical paralysis rooted in his personal 'identity politics'.

[Critical evaluation; a determined 'angle' which *asserts* and then *explains* and *defends* a definite statement.]

[Detailed, extensive, and alive to other critical possibilities]

"TELLING"

"SHOWING"

The language of Jekyll's 'full statement' embodies the novel's theme of duality.

[Prove it then!]

In the climactic section of his 'full statement', the instability of Jekyll's selfhood is reflected by shifts in grammatical person: 'He, I say – I cannot say I'.

[Presents good evidence, but doesn't use it to properly illustrate the point, or to develop it further.]

Despite the clarity and assurance of his 'full statement', Jekyll's account is full of disturbing ambiguities. The Doctor narrates his/Hyde's perilous voyage in a voice which is difficult to assign to either 'twin': 'I arranged my clothes as best I could, and summoning a passing handsome, drove to an hotel ... At my appearance (which was indeed comical enough, however tragic an effect these garments covered) the driver could not conceal his mirth. I gnashed my teeth upon him with a gust of devilish fury...'. This single character refers to itself as a unitary 'I', and yet there is a clear discrepancy between this calmly perceptive *narrating* self, which notices the driver's reaction, and the unbridled, seemingly uncontainable rage of the *experiencing* self whose activities it describes. Thus the effect of the famous 'division' of Stevenson's character is partly the product of textual instabilities common to all self-narration.

[Specific evidence used to illustrate the point, and incorporated into a developing argument. Here the evidence doesn't just 'prove' an earlier assertion, but is continually interrogated as the analysis moves from particulars to the general.]