

Revising Prose

by Richard Lanham

Macmillan Publishing

ISBN 978-0205309443

After I graduated from college with my English degree, I immediately got a job in the corporate world, where I encountered culture shock. My boss required a status report on my current project. I sent him a four-paragraph report. He later came to my desk, laid the report in front of me with three sentences circled, “this is all I need from now on,” he told me. Likewise, my initial reports were full of extraneous words that made readers stumble, like “The subject of this scope document is to analyze the audience for the Oil module of Trusted Link Distributor.” A simpler version of that sentence is, “This is the audience analysis for Trusted Link Distributor.”



The corporate world is fast-paced, so no one has time to read an abundance of content. Gone are the days of elaborate exposition and heavy adjectives. I learned to renovate my academic, literary, essay style into a business style. It was not easy. I had four years of exposing Shakespeare’s, Spenser’s, and Chaucer’s secrets in essays, research papers, and stories where I had to exhibit my knowledge, comprehension, and talent. I had to develop a voice for the corporate readers. Communication in the business world is nothing like academic communication. Richard Lanham’s *Revising Business Prose* helped me to make a successful transition.

Business and professional writing must be concrete, clear, and uncluttered. It must lucidly convey the author’s intention quickly and efficiently. Reports, e-mails, notes, schedules, status documents, and other business correspondence must make their point fluently and distinctly. In *Revising Business Prose*, world-renowned rhetoric scholar Richard Lanham discusses how to transform official, scholarly, and poetic writing into easy-to-read, straightforward prose that is vivid and meaningful. Lanham is a recognized expert in prose stylistics and Classical and Renaissance rhetoric. He advocates rewriting prose to improve style and clarity.

We are inundated with scholarly and academic writing that can be abstract, passive-voiced, long winded, and replete with words you find on an SAT test and need a dictionary to

understand. This type of writing has its audience and location, but it has no place in business documents. Readers must not be forced to plow through excessive nouns, modifiers, and complex sentences to extract the information they require. Likewise, poetic diction laced with adjectives and gerund-formed verbs are too loquacious for business and professional documents.

In *Revising Business Prose*, Lanham introduces the Paramedic method, which is a method for writing verb-dominated and action-oriented prose that quickly lines up actor, action, and object and removes useless prepositions, helping verbs, and euphemisms that can obscure reading and hide meaning. For example, instead of writing “It has been determined that the individual’s continued presence in the present personnel configuration is a detriment to ongoing operational efficiency,” Lanham encourages a more direct approach, “I decided to fire him”. The Official Style is what Lanham calls writing that makes the simple sound complex and is laden with vague, general nouns, impersonal and passive action, and obscure meaning.

The Paramedic Method is a short but powerful eight-step process:

1. Circle the prepositions.
2. Circle the “is” forms.
3. Ask, “Where’s the action?” “Who’s kicking who?”
4. Put this “kicking” action in a simple (not compound) action verb.
5. Start fast—no slow windups.
6. Write out each sentence on a blank sheet of paper and mark off its basic rhythmic units with a “/”.
7. Read the passage aloud with emphasis and feeling.
8. Mark off sentence lengths in the passage with a “/”.

Lanham thoroughly explains each step in this process, and clear examples and explanations accompany each step. You can easily teach yourself Lanham’s method and style.

When business prose is clear, brief, and straightforward, time and money are saved. Yes, businesses save money with distinct prose by decreasing print and translation communication costs. Clear prose cuts down on misunderstandings, confusion, and the need to re-explain obscure text.

Employing a humorous voice and conversational style, Lanham explains why some types of prose do not work for business writing. He situates examples of the Official Style and the Paramedic Method side-by-side so that you can clearly see the difference the Paramedic Method makes in sentence length, style, clarity, and meaning. He illustrates how to vary sentences, discard bland nouns, and dominate your prose with strong verbs. This book is my writing bible. I refer to it every time I write. It is my favorite book about strong writing. I recommend it to anyone who wants to write clear, concise prose.