

# Legal Communication & Rhetoric: JALWD

Fall 2015 / Volume 12

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Of Neurons and Nominalizations**

Steven Pinker, *The Sense of Style:  
The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*

Lisa Eichhorn, reviewer

## Of Neurons and Nominalizations

### The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century

Steven Pinker (Viking 2014), 359 pages

Lisa Eichhorn, Reviewer\*

Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker has interrupted his series of remarkably accessible books on human cognition<sup>1</sup> to bring us what he terms “a writing guide for the twenty-first century.”<sup>2</sup> Happily, *The Sense of Style* resembles Pinker’s prior books in that it’s filled with uncannily apt examples drawn from absolutely everywhere—a physicist’s essay on the multiple-universe theory, a *New York Times* obituary of Helen Gurley Brown, a line from *This Is Spinal Tap*—and with Pinker’s generosity of spirit. The author empathizes with those engaged in the hard work of translating ideas into clear, seemingly effortless prose:

It takes cognitive toil and literary dexterity to pare an argument to its essentials, narrate it in an orderly sequence, and illustrate it with analogies that are both familiar and accurate. As Dolly Parton said, “You wouldn’t *believe* how much it costs to look this cheap.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., *THE STUFF OF THOUGHT: LANGUAGE AS A WINDOW INTO HUMAN NATURE* (2007); *THE LANGUAGE INSTINCT* (1994); *HOW THE MIND WORKS* (1997).

<sup>2</sup> STEVEN PINKER, *THE SENSE OF STYLE: THE THINKING PERSON'S GUIDE TO WRITING IN THE 21ST CENTURY* 6 (2014).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 37.

Pinker's field is psycholinguistics, and his overarching task in *The Sense of Style* is to divide traditional writing-related rules into two categories: those that actually facilitate the reader's cognitive task and those that do little beyond making pedants feel superior.

Pinker asserts that today's writers "rightly expect *reasons* for any advice that is foisted upon them,"<sup>4</sup> and he supplies those reasons in cognitive terms. For example, we should avoid jargon and favor concrete explanations because, according to much research, we are terrible at remembering that other people do not know everything we do. We should omit needless words because readers must simultaneously monitor a sentence's unfolding syntax and hold specific words in mind before short-term memory expires. We should pay attention to word placement because the frequency with which certain word-sequences occur in English affects the way in which readers assume our words relate to each other: an announcement of "a panel with four professors on drugs" may draw a large audience that will ultimately be disappointed in seeing only a panel on drugs with four professors.

Thus, this book is not a style guide in the usual sense; it proposes a new way to think about style rather than a new list of dos and don'ts. That's not to say that *The Sense of Style* lacks specific prescriptions and proscriptions. Indeed, the final chapter—"Telling Right from Wrong"—contains 108 pages of guidance on topics related grammar, diction, and punctuation. Much of the debunking contained here will be familiar to longtime teachers of legal writing: don't sweat the occasional split infinitive, or a sentence beginning with "And" or ending with a preposition.

Pinker aims to help writers achieve a "classic style,"<sup>5</sup> a model of prose he describes as being suitable for essays, articles, reviews, and editorials. Although classic style strives for clarity and simplicity, it is a bit more easygoing than the style of legal briefs and memoranda. For example, Pinker sees no problem with substituting "like" for "as" in introducing a clause, although he does helpfully note that one option is less formal than the other.<sup>6</sup> Overall, I tend to agree with Pinker that "knowing the hallmarks of classic style will make anyone a better writer, and it is the strongest cure I know for the disease that enfeebles academic, bureaucratic, corporate, legal, and official prose."<sup>7</sup>

4 *Id.* at 6.

5 Pinker credits literary scholars Francis-Noel Thomas and Mark Turner for naming and describing the "classic style" model in "a wonderful little book called *Clear and Simple as*

*the Truth* [1994]." *Id.* at 28. For a review of the Thomas and Turner book, see this volume, p. 281 *infra*.

6 *Id.* at 217–18.

7 *Id.* at 31.

*The Sense of Style* is not necessarily for law students. The material on syntax and coherence is quite dense, and students would likely find the references to “determiners” and “coordinations” confusing.<sup>8</sup> However, for anyone who writes nonfiction for a living, the book should be required reading. Indeed, *The Sense of Style* could have worked wonders on several law-review articles I’ve plowed through recently.

Teachers of legal writing may benefit most of all from *The Sense of Style*. What better way to explain why students should care about certain grammar and punctuation conventions than to note, as Pinker does, that obeying such rules “provide[s] grounds for confidence that the writer has a history of reading edited English and has given it his full attention”?<sup>9</sup> Or you might just share Pinker’s quotation of an employer explaining why he rejects job applications filled with errors: “If it takes someone more than 20 years to notice how to properly use *it’s*, then that’s not a learning curve I’m comfortable with.”<sup>10</sup> Further, faculty will likely have fun drawing on Pinker’s vast store of illustrative cartoons, comic strips, and jokes, all of which are well worth adding to any teacher’s repertoire. And lest we lose sight of the big picture, *The Sense of Style* reminds us that “[w]e can share our advice on how to write well without treating the people in need of it with contempt. . . . And we can remind ourselves of the reasons to strive for good style: to enhance the spread of ideas, to exemplify attention to detail, and to add to the beauty of the world.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Pinker bases his grammatical analyses on the system described in Rodney Huddleston & Geoffrey K. Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002), which was unfamiliar to me. When I saw that the volume costs of \$200 on Amazon, I decided not to spring for a copy. Nevertheless, with some slow, very focused reading and the help of *The Sense of Style*’s glossary, I was able to learn much from Pinker’s syntax chapter.

<sup>9</sup> PINKER, *supra* note 2, at 197. Pinker uses the masculine pronoun here because he opted, in the name of being non-sexist, to refer to generic readers as one sex and generic writers as the other. The assignment of sex roles switches back and forth in each subsequent chapter.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 304–05.