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The Decline of the Written Word

William Safire

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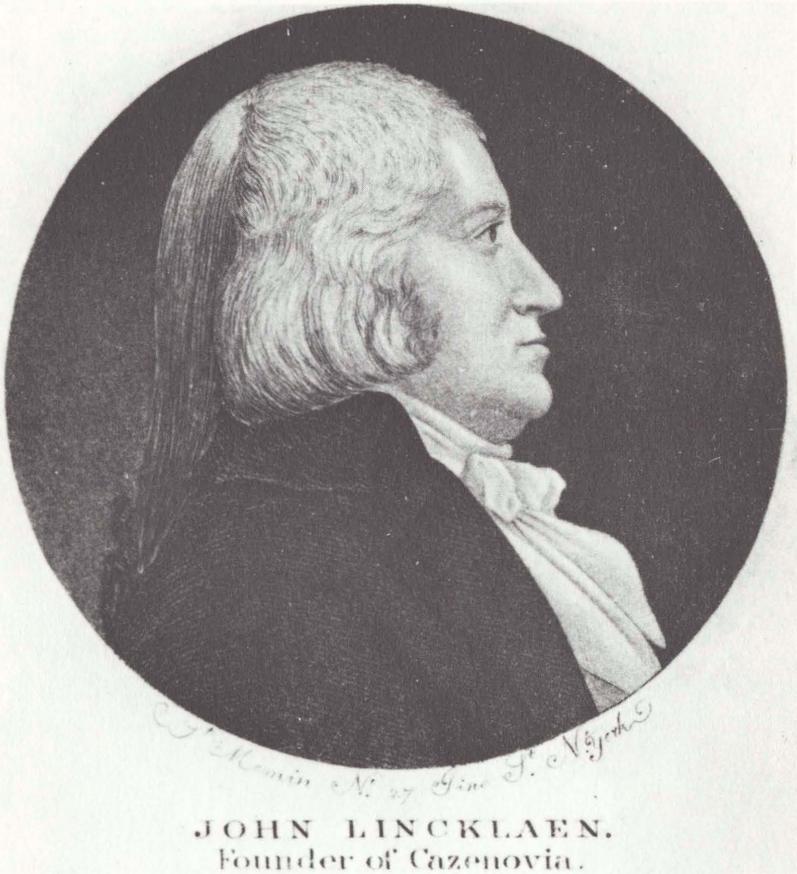


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Recommended Citation

Safire, William. "The Decline of the Written Word." The Courier 16.1 (1979): 22-26.

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JOHN LINCKLAEN.
Founder of Cazenovia.

THE COURIER

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The Decline of the Written Word

by William Safire

At the Syracuse University Commencement ceremonies, May 13, 1978, Mr. William Safire spoke to the graduates and their guests. With Mr. Safire's permission, we are pleased to publish his commencement address for our readers.

Classmates:

I entered this University with the Class of '51, and am finally receiving my degree with the Class of '78. There is hope for slow learners.

My subject today is "The Decline of the Written Word." If the speech I have written is disjointed and confusing, you will get my point the hard way.

We have not heard an eloquent speech out of the White House in a long time. Why? When you ask the speechwriters of Mr. Ford and Mr. Carter, they give you this explanation: they say that "high-flown rhetoric" is not their man's style.

But this is not responsive. A flowery speech is a bad speech. Simple, straight English prose can be used to build a great speech. There has to be a more profound reason for the reluctance of the presidents of the seventies to write out their thoughts plainly and deliver them in words we can all understand.

If you press the president's aides — and that's my job, to press them hard — they'll admit that their man much prefers to ad-lib answers to questions. He's not good at what they call a "set" speech.

What do they really mean by that? They mean that a speech — a written speech, developing an idea — is not what people want to hear. People prefer short takes, Q and A; the attention span of most Americans on serious matters is about twenty seconds, the length of a television clip.

In the same way, people do not want to read articles as they once did; today, if you cannot get it in a paragraph, forget it.

As a result, we're becoming a short-take society. Our presidency, which Theodore Roosevelt called a "bully pulpit," is a forum for thirty-second spots. Our food for thought is junk food.

What has brought this about? I don't blame President Carter for this — he reflects the trend; he did not start it. I don't flail out at the usual whipping-boy, television. And I'm not suggesting that there isn't plenty of excellent writing being published.

The reason for the decline of the written word — written speeches, written articles — is that we, as a people, are writing less and talking more. Because it takes longer to prepare your thoughts on paper, that means we are ad-libbing more, and it means we are thinking more superficially. An ad-lib has its place, but not ad nauseam.

That's one of those sweeping statements that pundits are permitted to make. But let me turn reporter for a minute and prove to you that we're talking more and writing less.

Most people are not writing personal letters any more. Oh, the volume of first class letters has doubled since 1950, but here's the way the mail breaks down. Over eighty percent is business-related, over ten percent is greeting-card and Christmas card, and only three percent is from one person to another to chew the fat.

More and more, we're relying on commercial poets and cartoonists to express our thoughts for us. Tomorrow is Mother's Day; how many of us are relying on canned sentiments? I remembered my brother once laboriously hand-made a card for my mother: on the front was "I'll never forget you Mother," and inside it said, "You gave away my dog." Okay, he was sore, but at least he was original.

The greatest cultural villain of our times, in my opinion, has a motherly image: Ma Bell. The telephone company. Instead of writing, people are calling; instead of communicating, they're staying in touch.

Here we are, all holders of college degrees. When was the last time you wrote, or received a long, thoughtful letter? When was the last time you wrote a passionate love letter? No, that takes time, effort, thought — there's a much easier way, the telephone. The worst insult is when kids call home, collect, for money; when my kids go to college, the only way they'll get a nickle out of me is to write for it.

As the percentage of personal mail has dwindled, the number of telephone installations since 1950 has quadrupled. What has undermined the average person's need to write is simple economics: while the cost of a letter has gone up, the cost of a call has gone down.

During World War I, a first-class letter cost two cents an ounce; in a few months, it will be sixteen cents an ounce. In that same sixty years, a New York to San Francisco call has gone from twenty dollars for three minutes down to fifty-three cents today, if you're willing to call at night or on a weekend. Letters up eight hundred percent; phone calls down to one-fortieth of the cost to grandpa. No wonder the market share of communication has dropped for writers. In the year I was a freshman here, the postal service had over a third of the communication business; today, it is one-sixth, and falling.

And it's going to get worse. Phonevision is on the way. We have seen what happened to the interpersonal correspondence of love in the past generation. The purple passages of prose and tear-stained pages of the love-letters have become the heavy breathing, grunts, and

“Like, I mean, y’know, wow” of the love call. The next stage, with the visual dimension, requires not even a loud sigh: we can just wave at each other to say hello; wiggle our fingers, to express affection; raise our eyebrows to ask “What’s new?” get a shrug in reply, and sign off with a smile and a wink.

We need not degenerate further from written English to verbal signals to sign language. We need to become modern reactionaries; I consider myself a neo-Neanderthal; and my happiest moment of the year comes as daylight saving ends in October, when I can turn back the clock.

How do we save ourselves from the tyranny of the telephone? How do we liberate our language from the addiction to the ad-lib?

If this were an off-the-cuff presentation, I would drift off into a fuzzy evasion like “There are no easy answers.” But one thing I have learned in preparing my first commencement address, and the main advice I shall burden you with today, is this: there are plenty of easy answers. The big trick is to think about them and write them down.

There are four steps to the salvation of the English language and thus to the rejuvenation of clear thinking in your working lives:

First, remember that first drafts are usually stupid. If you shoot off your mouth with your first draft — that is, if you make your presentation orally — your stupidity shines forth for all to hear. But if you write your first draft — of a letter, a memo, a description of some transcendental experience that comes to you while jogging — then you fall on your face in absolute privacy. You get the chance to change it all around. It is harder to put your foot in your mouth when you have your pen in your hand.

Second, reject the notion that honesty and candor demand that you “let it all hang out.” That’s not honesty, that’s intellectual laziness. Tuck some of it in; edit some of it out. Talking on your feet, spinning thoughts off the top of your head, just rapping along in a laid-back way has been glorified as expressing your natural self. But you did not get an education to become natural, you got an education to become civilized. Composition is a discipline; it forces us to think. If you want to “get in touch with your feelings,” fine — talk to yourself, we all do. But if you want to communicate with another thinking human being, get in touch with your thoughts. Put them in order; give them a purpose; use them to persuade, to instruct, to discover, to seduce. The secret way to do this is to write it down, and then cut out the confusing parts.

Third, never forget that you own the telephone, the telephone does not own you. Most people cannot bear to listen to a phone ring without answering it. It’s easy to not answer a letter, but it’s hard to not answer a phone. Let me pass along a solution that has changed my life. When I was in the Nixon Administration, my telephone was tapped (I had

been associating with known journalists). So I took an interest in the instrument itself. Turn it upside down; you will notice a lever that says “Louder.” Turn it away from the direction of louder. That is the direction of emancipation. If somebody needs to see you, they’ll come over. If somebody needs to tell you what they think, or even express how they feel, they can write. There are those who will call you a recluse, a hermit — but it is better to listen to your own different drummer than to go through life with a ringing in your ears.

My fourth point will impress upon you the significance of the written word. Those of you who have been secretly taking notes, out of a four-year habit, will recall that I spoke of “four steps” to the salvation of the English language. Here it is: there is no fourth step. I had four steps in mind when I began, but I forgot the fourth. Now, if I were ad-libbing, I would remember I had promised four points, and I would do what so many stump speakers do — toss in the all-purpose last point, which usually begins “There are no easy answers.” But in writing down what you think, you can go back and fix it — instead of having to phumph around with a phony fourth point, you can change your introduction to “There are three steps.” Perhaps you wonder why I did not do so. Not out of any excess of honesty, or unwillingness to make a simple fix — I just wanted you to see the fourth step take shape before your very eyes.

Is the decline of the written word inevitable? Will the historians of the future deal merely in oral history? I hope not. I hope that oral history will limit itself to the discovery of toothpaste and the invention of mouthwash. I don’t want to witness the de-composing of the art of composition or be present when we get in touch with our feelings and lose contact with our minds.

I’m a conservative in politics, which means I believe that we as a people have to lead our leaders, to show them how we want to be led.

Accordingly, I think we have to send a message to the podium from the audience: we’re ready for more than Q and A. We’re ready for five or ten minutes of sustained explication. A fireside chat will not turn out our fires. If you will take the time to prepare, we are prepared to pay attention.

That, of course, is contrary to the trend, against the grain. It can only come from people who care enough to compose, who get in the habit of reading rather than listening, of being in communication instead of only in contact.

When Great Britain was fighting World War II alone, an American president did something that would be considered cornball today: FDR sent Churchill a poem along with a letter, that said:

Sail on, O Ship of State!
Sail on, O Union! strong and great!
Humanity will all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!

Churchill took the message from Wendell Wilkie, who brought FDR's letter, and selected a poem in answer. At that moment, looking east, England faced invasion; looking to the west across the Atlantic, Churchill saw potential help. The poem he sent concluded:

And not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in the light;
In front, the sun climbs slow, how slowly,
But westward, look, the land is bright.*

High flown rhetoric? Perhaps. And perhaps poetry, which had an honored place in a 1961 inauguration, is too rich for some tastes today.

And now I remember the fourth step. I like to think we can demand some sense of an occasion, some uplift, some inspiration from our leaders — not empty words and phony promises — but words full of meaning, binding thoughts together with purpose, holding promise of understandable progress. If we ask for it, we'll get it — if we fail to ask, we'll get more Q and A.

I believe we can arrest the decline of the written word, thereby achieving a renaissance of clarity. And not by eastern establishment windows only, but this side of the Potomac, the Charles, and the Hudson Rivers — “westward, look, the land is bright.”

*“The Building of the Ship” is by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Churchill's quotation is from “Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth” by Arthur Hugh Clough. — Ed.